

There's Something that Doesn't Love A Wall
Ephesians 2: 11-20
Don Lincoln

I've not had many experiences as an outsider. But that reality is almost entirely the accident and privilege of my "insider" birth. I was born in the United States; born male; to a middle-class family in the suburbs of a big city in the Midwest; a white family; a Christian family; a family whose history has been hammered out in this nation for several hundred years; and with a last name that is not only easy to pronounce, but is highly respected.

Unless, of course, you move South. Which I did. My first pastoral call 38 years ago was in North Carolina. But – it was to the suburbs of Charlotte – a rapidly growing, cosmopolitan-developing city, with plenty of Yankees in it. I did fine – until I had to leave that church. Which itself is a story too long to tell, but after four years as the longest tenured associate pastor in that large congregation, the head of staff decided he no longer wanted me around, so I found myself without a job and a 10-month old child.

It just so happened that in the next county – a pastor had left his congregation in the lurch, belittling them and all things Presbyterian in his parting-shot sermon on his last Sunday when he left the denomination. The Presbytery – anxious to get me taken care of, and concerned for this wounded congregation – thought this must be God's timing, and that we'd be perfect for each other. So they told the church I would be their stated supply pastor while they looked for a permanent preacher.

Well – 40 minutes away in the next county was like being in another country. The church had 83 members. Five extended families encompassed 90% of the membership. It was farm country – not Crebilly gentleman's farm country – it was farm country. The church was surrounded by fields of milo. My first mistake was asking what that was growing in the fields around the church. When they told me I asked, "What the heck is milo?" **Strike one** (It's in the sorghum family if you don't know). The men sat on the front steps of the church prior to worship, and smoked, or spit, or both. I didn't join them – **strike two**. I drove to church in my car NOT made in America. **Strike three**.

I started worship that first Sunday by saying, "I want to thank you guys for letting me come be your pastor." "You guys?" Really? I wasn't even smart enough to say "Y'all?" And they didn't call their pastor "pastor." It was preacher. Preacher Lincoln. **Strike four and strike five**.

My bio in the bulletin was all wrong. Oh, it was factually correct – but what the Presbytery sent to them was all wrong. It said I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio (a big

northern city), went to Princeton Seminary (read high-falootin', liberal Yankee School). I currently lived in the suburbs of Charlotte, and had been the associate pastor in big city church (bad, bad, bad). It also mentioned I was related to Abraham Lincoln (I'm lucky I got out alive that first Sunday), and the last line mentioned that my favorite pastime was cycling (what grown man rides a bicycle?). Fortunately, I was bright enough to never let them know I had an Italian racing bicycle and wore those skin-tight, form-fitting cycling pants. **Strikes 6 through 15.**

I was an outsider. But in reality, the dividing walls weren't all that difficult to scale. I learned quickly that mostly what I had to do was pick hymns they already knew – like “On a Hill far Away.....” or “He Lives, He Lives, Christ Jesus Lives Today.” And – I brought my 10-month old daughter to church the second week, and they hadn't had a baby around for 15 years, so she helped melt the chill. And I preached about the love of Jesus – and they figured out I was OK. In fact, for the next ten months we loved each other back to health, and I'm more grateful to God than I can begin to describe for that chapter in my life.

But, I'm guessing if I had been female – or black – or my last name Abraham instead of Lincoln – it never would've worked. Too many walls. Too high a barrier. Too many fears. I would have been too outside the norm for them – far outside; way outside. Which, I realize, is something I have never really known in my white, upper-middle-class, male, Christian life: OUTSIDE. It's not my fault. But I didn't earn “inside” status. It was a gift.

And this is the reality into which Paul speaks in this letter to the Ephesians. Dividing walls - insiders, outsiders – but these are walls of huge significance – historically, culturally, racially, religiously – walls which are not scaled so easily as by singing the right kind of hymns. And Paul is trying to help the Ephesians remember who they were, that they might realize who they are.

Most of them are Gentiles. And Paul knows if the Gentiles forget who they were, they will soon presume God owes them something, and decide to live under their own merit and not under God's grace. Salvation, Paul insists, came to you Gentiles by grace through faith, not through human works, but as a gift from God. You can eliminate all reasons to boast of anything but God's mercy. That's what the first 10 verses of Ephesians chapter 2 say.

Paul reminds them, there was a time when the chosen – the circumcised – derided you. Remember: there was a time you were without Christ; strangers to the covenant of God; you were lacking hope; apart from God in the world. Outside the fold. Remember.

That's us. You and me. Gentiles. Outsiders. We forget that. You would think the way the church preaches, that Gentiles have ALWAYS had equal access to God. We don't mention the scandal of that particularity of God's work in human history; how it stings – that God revealed Godself to Israel first, and chose them – not us – as God's people.

And we have been grafted in – add-ons – adopted into God's household – NOT the other way around. The first Christians were Jews; Gentiles came second.

We forget that. But in that day and age, there was no way you could forget it. When Christianity entered the ancient world of Paul, there was a temple wall that separated the outer "court of the Gentiles" from the inner courts accessible only to Jews. Gentiles who tried to pass the barrier – from the outer court into the inner court – were liable for a penalty; even the penalty potentially of death.

That's the wall Paul is talking about when he states Christ "is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] into one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, in order to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace". Paul has taken down the temple wall. If you don't get it.....Paul has "quit preachin' and has gone to meddlin' here."

But reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is not some kind of happy "extra" – some bonus that Jesus brings through His death and resurrection. For Paul, the challenge of integrating Jews and Gentiles into one body was difficult, yes – but it was not optional. Salvation, reconciliation is not just vertical, between believer and God, it is also horizontal.

There is a crossbar on the Cross which reminds us that reconciliation takes place between US – one another – as well as between us and God. That's the message Paul was declaring – Jew and Gentile – one people now.

Our problem is, do you and I really resonate with that history? It's hard for you and me to remember that at one point we did NOT belong. In fact, it's so far back it may not have any meaning for us. So where and how do we see ourselves in this text? Let me give a recent example in my own life.

Princeton Theological Seminary, from which I graduated and where I am on the Board of Trustees, just recently completed an historical audit of the Seminary's relationship to slavery. While none of the buildings were built with slave labor, and no slaves were employed by the institution, I learned some surprising things. Among them I learned there was actually a large contribution to the seminary's endowment, years ago, from a church in the south, whose members rented out their slaves for a fundraiser for the seminary's endowment. My tuition was paid for by Princeton's endowment. I paid room and board but the seminary's endowment paid for my tuition.

I've been quite delighted in all my ancestry work, I've found no slaveholders in my family – but now I'm faced with how the history of slavery benefitted me. Another privilege I didn't earn; paid for on the backs of others.

Princeton Seminary is doing this study, as are so many other schools of higher learning, in order to pursue truth and understand the implications of history for contemporary reality. That's certainly of value for an institution of learning, and a seminary of the church. In acknowledging that history, the seminary repents – for at times clearly

misconstruing and ignoring the most fundamental task of Christian witness – to love our neighbors as ourselves.

It rang home for me in ways that I have just never been really, fully cognizant of – that I've never really known what it is like NOT to be privileged – and how wide and deep that privilege is. Perhaps that is what Paul would remind me of in THIS passage – God's spirit using the apostles' words to say to me: "Remember, Don, your entire life you have had the upper hand; power; place; standing."

"Oh no," I say, "There were always people smarter than me. Taller than me. Faster than me. Better looking than me. Wealthier than me. Better singing voices than me. Always, God!"

Yeah – but you know what I realize? I'm guessing I had a leg up on becoming the head of staff of Westminster 18 years ago. Simply because I am a man. An accident of birth.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." That's what Paul wrote to the Galatians, and the Colossians, and in essence what he is saying here to the Ephesians. No more walls.

Yet it's hard. Since the earliest days of Christian community, we have been professionals at division. We are some of the most gifted engineers – we church people - when it comes to building walls. We have graduate degrees in how to subdivide and segregate communities.

Male/female; slave/free; Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, Baptist. "Progressive Christians," or "Mainline Christians" or "Evangelical Christians." "Bible Believing Church," "Born-Again Believers"; "Christ-Centered Church," "Seeker Sensitive Church," "Missional Church," – all of which seem to imply there are other misbehaving churches or Christians because they don't believe they we do.

Paul makes it clear in this text that we have been put into fellowship by the cross of Christ. We don't get to choose our sisters and brothers in Christ any more than we choose parents or siblings. God has chosen them for us. All humanity is our neighbor.

It's always so easy to ask "what's the problem with a wall?" (pick your wall; any wall – spiritual, figurative, literal) – it's easy to say what's the matter with the wall, when I've never been on the other side of it – the outside of it – the walled-out side of it. I've never been a woman and been faced with their walls in employment, or pay, or the "permeable" walls of harassment or intimidation by men. I've never been the minority. I've never been the immigrant.

The world is full of walls. Everywhere you and I go, there are fences, gates, partitions and other ingeniously constructed barriers – all aimed at keeping something or someone in and keeping something or someone else out.

We need walls: walls in our homes to protect us against wind and rain; walls to keep livestock safely in and predators out; walls to help us separate spaces and improve organization and efficiency. But one does not have to be a sage to comprehend how walls, both literal and spiritual, can lead to grief, division and even violence. All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God.¹

Honest meditation on the fact that at one point you and I did not belong – that we were outsiders – or on the fact that today, many of us are insiders – and love the walls we have – because we’ve always been on the inside – honest meditation on those facts could make us more humble as individuals, as a church, as a people, as a nation.

I love the “big tent” nature of this congregation. A mix of theological, political, social identities. You cannot imagine what someone else in the pew next to you might actually think on any number of issues!! Male and female, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, mainline and sideline, addicted to drugs or addicted to money.... I love that this congregation covers the map.

We are in community because Christ died for us. Every one of us. We belong to each other. We NEED each other. Because we are bound together, loved together, saved together, by the cross of Christ.

The cross of Jesus destroys all pride in self – because there is **no self of which to be proud**. The cross of Jesus declares that **the other** is one for whom Christ died too. The cross of Christ declares all humanity is in the same boat.

Paul makes it pretty clear in this text, Jesus is in the business of tearing down walls between those He loves. And tell me who He doesn’t love? AMEN.

1. Kevin Baker “Wrecking Crew,” Article in *The Christian Century*, July 11, 2006.