Christ is Our Peace Kristie W. Finley

Ephesians 2: 14-19 First Presbyterian Church

World Communion Sunday Lake Forest, Illinois

**Prayer for Illumination**

Holy Spirit, settle our hearts and minds as we read the scriptures today. Help us to hear them in a new way. May our meditations and actions be acceptable to God and may the peace of Christ be with us. Amen.

Today’s scripture comes from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2 verses 14-19.

14For 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. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

It always amazes me that the scripture can fit so closely with what is happening in our world today, with what was happening thousands of years ago. Talk of walls, insiders and outsiders, reconciliation, strangers and aliens, hostility, all this on world communion Sunday.

This letter is believed to have been written to several congregations in Ephesus, not just one of many as Paul’s earlier letters were. Which shows us the diversity of the early church even when they were in close proximity to each other. You don’t need to be spread out over the globe to have diversity.

The letter addresses the concern that some are holding tightly to the laws of Torah and old customs. This causes a separation between the gentiles and those who were Jewish. Paul saw this wall crumbling. But it did not mean that then the Gentiles would become Jewish, or the Jewish would become Gentiles. The Jew is reconciled to God in Christ, and the Gentile is reconciled to God in Christ and in Christ they become a new being. It is Christ who does the reconciling, not humanity.

Paul is alluding to the actual wall that had separated Jewish and Gentile, the Court of the Gentiles which was the outer court of the Temple, but here what separates them is legalism, tradition, custom and most importantly attitude. There was hostility and enmity between the groups. This hostility could be pointed to, on the wall in the courtyard was an inscription that warned the gentiles of death if they crossed over because they would pollute the holy place.

This may seem extreme to us but the Jewish and the Gentiles had been separated for the whole of covenant history. They were suspicious of each other, they had different customs and belief systems. They had no points at which to connect. So, long before there were physical walls at the temple there were emotional and figurative walls that separated them. These two had stood at polar opposites. Maybe weakening the wall might be possible, bringing them a little closer together, but reconciling these two together would seem impossible. And it was, except through Christ.

Walls are not consigned to the ancient past. Most of us in the room can bring up images of walls, real and imagined in not only the past, but today as well. The use of walls or fences to keep us separated has been a theme. Poet Robert Frost wrote that, “Good fences make good neighbors.” Many have taken that advice quite literally and put up tall fences before ever meeting their neighbor. How do we reconcile that with Christ’s call to love our neighbor as oneself?

We remember the Iron Curtain, a figurative wall between Eastern Europe and Western Europe from 1945, at the end of WWII until 1991 when the actual Berlin Wall came down. Today we have walls in the middle east, and demilitarized zones that are effectively walls, walls around our schools, and walls on our own borders. And some of these walls can decide who actually lives and dies, much like the inscription on the temple wall.

Unity in the world or even in the church seems like a pipe dream. Ecumenical unity has been a goal for decades and where are we? We have separation within the Christian church. Some Christians feel other Christians are not Christian enough, or are not even Christians. Denominations are fracturing, and building walls between the very people with whom they once stood at the table.

We know that divisions exist, maybe not these ancient foes, but the right and the left, orthodox and progressive, mainline and evangelical. We know they exist when we feel the prickle of judgement or defensiveness when these opposing groups are named and we are on one side or the other. We do not feel peace then.

The definition of peace in the English language does not come anywhere near defining the peace that Christ is. The dictionary defines peace as freedom from disturbance, tranquility, the cessation of or freedom from war or violence, freedom from civil disorder. The Hebrew word Shalom comes closer, it is defined as completeness, soundness, welfare, it sounds healing. Peace is not merely the end of hostility and enmity. Peace is not a truce or a cease-fire. Peace is not only found in the tearing down of dividing walls. Peace is found when Christ takes the center and we move out of the way. Peace is found when we follow in the way of Christ.

With this text rolling around in my head this week and my role as staff liaison of this past week’s event, I felt I was witnessing two groups merging in Christ, and finding the peace that he is.

There is a knee wall, not quite a full wall that at times exists here at the church and it came down again this past week. Rummage is a vital arm of our mission work here, but it can cause divisions. We must share resources, some of which are limited, such as parking and space in the building, there are regulations from the city, and being mindful of our neighbors. Negotiating all that can separate us and temporarily create a low wall. But this week as everyone pulled together to get the job done for mission, the wall crumbled and the stones fell away. The beauty of a joined community bloomed as we cooked together, lifted together, and worked for those who need the goods that are offered and the funds raised. It isn’t glamorous work. We have insiders and outsiders joining together. It looks hectic, and it is chaos at times, and there may be a stone or two we stumble over, but there is a peace there. The coming together that Paul speaks of in this letter to the Ephesians. Rummage is a lot of work, throughout the year as well as during sale weeks, but seeing it in the light of the reconciliation that we have in Christ. The peace that is Christ, well maybe the wall can remain down, maybe the stones will be crushed into sand.

In the early church when the Jewish people and the Gentiles, these two opposing groups would sit at the table together, when they ate together, what a sight! These two groups – who before would not even touch each other because they were considered unclean, where one was threatened with death to even step into the place of the other. They now sat together sharing in Christ, they had become one. We hear the words of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, which many know better than today’s passage, “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.” They witnessed God’s kingdom come. Where do you witness God’s Kingdom come?

Walls do come down. The end of Apartheid in South Africa, the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Peace and reconciliation training in Rwanda that is restoring relationships between people who had once hated each other. There is hope even in our working to take down walls that have stood for centuries. They may not be down today, but we are working toward the peace Christ is. The Faraja School in Tanzania has been working in the creation of a new identity for children with physical disabilities. Reading Power is helping to tear down the wall of illiteracy. We have sponsored adult faith formation sessions on interfaith relations to understand the diversity of our world. These are all working to reconcile people. To offer the hope of peace and restore relationships.

Because this new humanity was created in Christ we have something that is more valuable than getting along or coexisting, more valuable than being one thing or the other. We have a unique identity as Christian. To see each other as new creations, as brothers and sisters created in this new identity of Christ. Paul’s words move us from two people divided to one people united. From aliens to citizens, from hostility to peace. To move out as well equipped disciples we need to be in unity, connected to each other through our Christian identity. That does not mean we must be clones of each other, for God did not create us all the same, we have different gifts. But we must be unified in the peace and love that Christ calls us to.

We baptize our babies and bring them into this new family, we covenant to nourish them and bring them up as one of God’s children, to unite them with us in Christ. We celebrate at our funerals the gift of resurrection that is ours in Christ. As Christians we will engage in mission work that others may think foolish, walking outside of what our culture deems valuable, and Christians will even put themselves in harm’s way, because of this identity.

On this World Communion Sunday when we remember and reflect on the realization that we are one, we are Christians wherever we are, whatever we look like on the outside, because we are all insiders in Christ. Because we have Christ we are no longer strangers. In verse 13, the verse right before this scripture selection begins, Paul writes, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Today as we celebrate world communion Sunday throughout the world, as we come together as brothers and sisters we gather in a circle or around a table, or huddle in the dark around a candle, and share the cup, knowing we are not alone. We are together in Christ, one new creation. As you come forward for communion today, I ask that you joyfully gaze at each other and recognize Christ in each other. Recognize the new creation that is the church; that is us. AMEN