

“One new humanity”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
July 18, 2021

Ephesians 2:11-22

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Over the course of my life, I’ve been to two border walls, and oddly enough, none of them here. The first was in the West Bank, separating Palestinians and Israelis. (Anyone been there?) The second was in Belfast in Northern Ireland, dividing Protestants and Catholics. (Anyone been there?) The first was a 20-foot tall concrete wall armed with barbed wire and guards with guns. The second seemed more a relic of the past, but fresh paint and the stories of people injured or killed said otherwise. Both felt like a wound. Both made me incredibly sad.

I knew the reasons for these and other walls. Oppression, some would say, or prejudice, and they wouldn’t be wrong. But of course, walls are also built for safety. In Northern Ireland, for instance, there are still many people on both sides who want the walls to remain.

Walls are tricky things. They are, in essence, a moral failure, a resignation to division, to haves and have nots. They don’t solve problems; they punctuate them. And yet, for many of us, walls feel necessary. In an interview with National Geographic, historian David Frye says, “It was walls that gave people the security to sit and think.” He contends that walls allowed for philosophy and poetry and science, even morality itself.

Today, 4.7 billion people, or approximately 61 percent of the world population, live in a country with a border wall. A fortified wall of sand and millions of land mines separates Morocco and Western Sahara. In Korea, “a labyrinth of electric fencing, razor wire, concrete, surveillance cameras, and landmines” separates North from South.¹ There are walls in Spain, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Croatia, Nicaragua, South Africa, Kenya, and the United States. India is supposedly developing a wall with Nepal, which will keep out intruders with lasers. (What?) There’s even 450 miles of barbed wire fencing in Finland, all to stop... wait for it... reindeer. And of course, there’s the most famous wall of all: the great ice wall of *Game of Thrones*. Darn zombie dragon!

Walls protect us, and not just the literal ones either. There are people we don’t want in our lives: people who might hurt us.

Walls are tricky in Scripture too. God brings down the walls of Jericho and the Tower of Babel. But God also helps the people build walls around Jerusalem. Even the holy city of Revelation has walls. So does the Vatican. So does this church. So do I. I lock my doors at night.

In fact, pastor and theologian Karen Chakoian argues that God created the Law and the Ten Commandments as a kind of wall to protect people. “Do not kill, do not steal, do not commit

¹ Andrea Lisa

adultery” all define boundaries. For the Israelites, this division is what gave them their identity. It’s how they survived exile, slavery, oppression, war—by knowing that they were different, and their God was different.

For both Jews and Gentiles, this distinction determined who you ate with, who you loved, whom you served. There was a literal wall in the Jewish temple that told Gentiles they were not welcome; they could not go beyond the outer court, or they would be put to death. This was their holy place, one of the few things left to them in the world.

So, after all that, why would God take the wall away? Because, that’s what the author of Ephesians says today: God tears down our dividing walls. God ends the division between Jew and Gentile, between all of God’s children—between Palestinian and Israeli, English and Irish, native and immigrant, conservative and liberal, white and black, queer and straight, cis and trans, poor and rich... even abuser and abused, oppressor and oppressed?

Without those walls, I have to wonder if there weren’t some Jewish Christians at the time who suddenly felt lost, confused, unsafe. If all God does is bring down walls, that may not be good news. That might let the wolves in. Or out.

I wonder if sometimes that’s what we’ve done. The church is rife with a history of asking victims to forgive and reunite with the people who have hurt them, only to allow the abuse or oppression to continue. Is that the reconciliation God dreams of?

Or, we swing wide our doors and say all are welcome. No more walls. But what we really mean is that we want different people to come here and become like us, to dress like us, think like us, worship like us, act like us.

We might eliminate barriers to equality but the same people are still calling the shots, the same old systems are still in place, and so inequities persist.

A world without walls is chaos; it’s vulnerability; it’s injustice—if it’s the same old world. What we need is a new world. We’ve got to change the attitudes and cultures behind those walls. And that is precisely what the author of Ephesians says God offers us in Christ: a whole new system.

Ephesians says, “Christ tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance... Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created one new humanity, a fresh start for everybody... He treated us as equals, and so made us equals... This kingdom of faith is now your home country... You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone.”

One new humanity, or a “third race,” as some early church theologians called it. A new organization predicated on all of us, though undeserving, receiving equal portion in the gift of God’s grace, God’s love.

What’s radical about this new humanity is that one group doesn’t have to become like the other in order to belong. God doesn’t make Gentiles become Jews, or Jews become Gentiles. They get

to come as they are, and quintessentially remain themselves: Jew or Gentile, native or immigrant, white or black, queer or straight, cis or trans, Presbyterian or charismatic. There is no uniformity in this new unity.

It's not the differences that God eliminates; it's the use of differences to divide us and value some as better than others. In this new humanity, differences are celebrated.

God changes how we relate to each other. In place of walls, there are veins, running between you and me, and all of us, one interconnected body. And in this body, there is no place for hate or oppression or abuse or hierarchy. Because, when we're all interconnected, to hurt you *is* to hurt me.

In this new humanity, we are all citizens. We all belong. I cannot exclude you without excluding my own humanity.

We are capable of this new humanity, because—Ephesians says—we have a power not our own. We now all have access to the Holy Spirit. We, collectively, become a spiritual dwelling place for God. We become a temple of God's love, and that power flows through us. Thus, through Christ, we awaken not only to our humanity, but to our shared divinity as well. We participate in God.

This is why in a small rural abbey in Austria there hangs an unusual icon. This one contains no saints, no heroes of the church, no angels, just a village of ordinary people going about their lives. In the foreground is a massive table surrounded by people laughing and talking and sharing a meal. But there's something unexpected here: a halo encircles the head of each person. The title of the icon is "Xenophilia," meaning "love of strangers." Suddenly, you look back at the village and realize something's missing: there are no walls. And thus, there are no outsiders.²

That's what it means to participate in this new humanity. It means to have God-sight: where others see strangers, you see halos.

So what does this look like, in the real world, where—in each of us—halos are mixed with wolves?

First, it means letting the walls in you (your resentments, your prejudices, your defensiveness, your acquisitiveness) be torn down and becoming this new human. Be the change Christ has made. You don't have to earn it; you just have to see that you already are it, and choose to live like it.

Second, it means assuming that everyone you meet is a citizen of this new humanity but may not know it and thus may not always behave like it. It means they get your love, your respect, and your endeavor to help them see the halo you see. And when they behave like wolves, we don't become wolves back, but we also don't allow any of that old divided hostile humanity a single foothold in the new one. We oppose unequivocally any such behavior. No one gets to hurt us or hurt others.

² Paul Wadell, "Toward a welcoming congregation"

Third, it means inclusion isn't the goal; transformation is the goal. In this new humanity, we are not simply adding chairs so that more people can sit at the table. Don't just expand the table; change the table. Create a church that doesn't simply include people who are LGBTQ or of different races or ethnicities or who have disabilities or who are different in countless other ways. Create a church that completely re-envision with them worship and theology and leadership and love. A whole new way of being together. Embrace a God who is queer and trans and black and deaf and poor and abused and in recovery, a God truly of everyone.

So remember: the walls are just the first step. It's a new humanity that God's after.

Because being free isn't enough. It's what we do with that freedom that counts—or rather, what God does, and to what we say (at last) yes. A thousand times, yes! Yes, God! Yes! **Amen.**