

What God Is Tearing Down and What God is Building Up
IAMSCU. Puebla, Mexico
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May, 2017

We begin, always, with the grace of God, God's unmerited favor towards us. By this grace, Paul writes in Ephesians 2, you have been saved through faith and this is the gift of God, lest anyone should boast.

No matter our accomplishments or credentials or achievements, we return again to gift and grace. This verse, Ephesians 2. 8, written either by Paul or someone who wrote, thought, and sounded very much like Paul, summarizes an extended argument about the journey from the old life to the new. We were dead in our trespasses...but God...made us alive.

Do you remember the old phrase?

"I'm not what I want to be,
I'm not what I am going to be,
but thank God I'm not what I used to be!"

We were dead, Paul says, in Ephesians 2. 1, and then there is the turning point, in verse four:

But God... (if this was an African-American church somebody would say "Amen"!)

But God...

It is a clue to leave the past behind and focus on the future. I recall a conversation with a leader who had once been very critical of a politician and now found himself campaigning for that very same person. And so he was asked by a reporter, "*How do you make sense of this change of mind?*"

And the leader responded,

"Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."

All of us used to act like most people in the world do. We followed the rule of the destructive spiritual powers.

But God...

Yes, every saint has a past, that keeps us humble, but every sinner has a future. And this gives us hope in the power of God, who is rich in mercy. It is God who raised us from the dead to live in Christ. We depend on the grace of God that saves us. Praise God!

We could end there, but the scripture does not end there, Paul's line of thought does not end there, and our work does not end there. It is not enough that we are right with God, or more accurately that God has made things right with us. Paul goes forward to describe this faith not only at a personal level, but from a corporate perspective.

When we are right with God, there is the unfinished agenda of getting right with each other. And here we come upon the obstacle to our being right with each other, a profound division. In life there is often division. In the church, there is often division. Not in your country, I am sure, not in your institution of higher learning. But in my world, there is division. And we can trace this back to our Holy Book. You can pick most any New Testament letter: Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians. We find ourselves in Ephesians.

There are often, in life, two groups. The groups want to define themselves, we call them silos, in rural areas silos keep the grain pure, we call them echo chambers, where we continually speak and listen to people who sound a lot like us. And this reinforces a kind of separation. We objectify the others, we do not see them as persons, and in small and at times very real ways we go to war with them, justifying the violence that is within us. Paul speaks of a dividing wall of hostility.

There are dividing walls of hostility, both ancient and post-modern. Many of us have touched the western wall, a place of holiness but a place of separation—one branch of the children of Abraham could enter the holy of holies and another could not. Now another branch of the children of Abraham can enter the Dome of the Rock, and the others cannot. I have touched the wall that separates San Diego, California and Tijuana, Mexico, and given and received communion through that fence. I have stopped and prayed along the Syrian border with a group of ordinands a year ago, listening to the gunfire and observing the rising smoke. I grew up in the deep south of the United States that in my childhood still had vestiges of the Jim Crow laws. I serve in a denomination that is struggling with the full inclusion of the LGBTQ community.

Walls separate, differentiate, segregate.

The hostility, the dividing wall that is between us, is about our behavior, but, more deeply, it is about our way of being in relation to each other. I have been helped by the wisdom of The Anatomy of Peace. It teaches me that...

When we have a heart at peace we see others as persons.

When we have a heart at war we see others as objects.

When we see others as persons we look for ways to help things go right.

When we see others as objects we exaggerate our differences.

When we have a heart at peace we admit that we may be a part of the problem.

When we have a heart at war we see others as the problem.

When we want to create change we build relationships.

When we want to perpetuate the status quo we seek to fix or change others.

When we have a heart at peace we practice forgiveness and reconciliation.

When we have a heart at war we take up the weapons of conflict and collusion.

When we have a heart at peace we listen to the lives of others.

When we have a heart at war we make assumptions about the lives of others.

When we listen to the lives of others we see them as persons.

When we do not listen to the lives of others we see them as objects.

We honor ourselves—the image of God—when we seek peace.

We betray ourselves—the image of God—when we go to war.

We influence other people by building relationships.

We build relationships by listening and noticing.

When we notice, we liberate others—they become persons and not objects.

When we listen and notice in healthy relationships, correction is possible.

We move from peace to war in small, almost imperceptible ways.

We move from peace to war in the choices we make.

The good news of the apostle Paul in Ephesians is about the very nature of God, about God's way of being, in the person of Jesus Christ:

He is our Peace.

He is our peace, and he has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that is between us.

He breaks down walls. We build them.

And yet it is clear in the scripture that our God is in the business of tearing them down. The revered New Testament scholar of a generation ago, F. F. Bruce, has noted that

“No iron curtain, color bar, class distinction or national distinction of today is more absolute than the cleavage between Jew and Gentile was in antiquity.”

The Jew and Gentile in antiquity separated according to traditions of circumcision and food laws and understandings of ritual purity and birthright. It was a profound differentiation. We can look back, as if we are really quite beyond all of that, but are we?

Do you recall the last time you tried to revise the curriculum, or change the liturgy of worship, or set new geographical lines for the church?

We have our preferences, our music, our languages, our food, our tribal rituals, our flags, we have, in Parker Palmer's language, our "issue silos". And they divide us.

And so Paul could not conclude with the glorious good news of our personal salvation....there was an unfinished agenda. He had to remind these two groups that they were one in Christ. He had to seek the unity.

This remains our unfinished agenda. And why is that? Maybe it is a failure of imagination!

Some of you may be familiar with an organization Doctors Without Borders, Medicines sans Frontieres. Doctors without Borders believes that saving a life, fulfilling their own oath to heal, is so important that it transcends all of the human constructions of borders and politics and even human laws.

What if there were a movement called Methodists without Borders. What if we believed that the salvation we offer, mind, body and spirit, is so important, that it transcends the vagaries of human politics and laws, and the walls we construct to protect our power and privilege.

What if a movement called Methodists without Borders had a mission to spread scriptural holiness, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, what if we had a charge to keep and a God to glorify, what if we announced the good news that he breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free?

If a movement such as Methodists without Borders were to arise, it's founding document, its magna carta, could very well be taken from the worlds of Ephesians 2. And this movement, I believe, would be grounded in the realities of grace and gift.

At our worst we always want to divide the gift, as if we could, as if this were an option, to create a personal holiness camp and a social holiness club, a right wing and a left wing, a republican church and a democrat church, a U.S. church and a non-U.S. church (forgive us). And once the divisions become embedded in our minds we construct borders and walls, to keep the pure within and to keep the other at a distance.

One of the great tragedies of the Christian Church is that we want to somehow divide and even dissect this great gift. And really this is absurd. It makes no sense, except that it perpetuates the divisions that exist between us, it justifies a heart at war.

But what if the fullness of the gospel is my own personal experience of a grace that saves me and takes me from the old life to the new life (Ephesians 2.8) and my inescapable participation

(Ephesians 2. 14) in the breaking down of the dividing wall of hospitality that separates me from my brother and my sister?

This is more than “let’s just get along”, it is more than tolerance, it is even more than inclusivity. It is the fullness of the gospel, it is the fullness of grace. And in the call of the church, to serve as a bishop, I was asked to work on this unfinished business. I placed my hand on a Bible and said I would try to do it, with the grace of God. I know this, because I can remember saying the words, in public. It is the same work I do in a conference (Florida) that possesses an almost dizzying diversity: Anglo and Cuban and Haitian and Puerto Rican, native African Americans and transplanted African Americans, very large churches and very small churches, and some of the most liberal and conservative, connectional and congregational people I have ever met in my life. And they are all United Methodists!

And yes, many of them hear the drumbeats of hearts going to war, they see the gathering of bricks to build the walls higher and higher.

I know this is not the way of peace, not the way of the Lord, it’s not of God, but sometimes I wonder if this is our destiny.

And then I remember the words I often find myself saying each morning, words found in the Book of Common Prayer:

**Lord Jesus Christ,
you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross
that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace:
So clothe us in your Spirit
that we, reaching forth our hands in love,
may bring those who do not know you
to the knowledge and love of you;
for the honor of your Name.**

“So that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace...”

There is an echo of this toward the end of Ephesians 2. God is tearing down the walls, and taking those same building materials—God is into recycling!—and God is creating something new, a family a temple, a dwelling place for God.

And through Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone, Paul writes in verse 18, we have access in one Spirit to the Father. That is a beautiful and profound word, access. You are educators. Most of us here had the benefit of an education. This happened because we had access. We were accepted, admitted. We gained entrance. Someone saw something in us, provided for us, made a way where there seemed to be no way.

The old way—that we have to extend our borders, include you in our territory so that you will know our god—was colonialism. The new paradigm of the apostle Paul is that the walls have come down. The NT scholar Michael Gorman contends that for Paul...

“all binaries (categories of splitting of humanity into two groups) constructed by human about humans are subverted by the gospel of Christ the peacemaker....in the joining of Jews and Gentiles into one, God’s plan is to join all divided groups into one new humanity: men and women slaves and free, parents and children, but also all other divisions in the human race that have emerged since the first century and will emerge in the years to come.”

God is taking all that had been divided, and all of the raw materials of our wall-building, border-establishing hearts at war, and channeling them toward a more ultimate purpose—the flourishing of all of creation, one new humanity. It is such good news that we would want to share it with every creature!

So what if we invested our energies not in the building of walls for our gated communities of faith, but in the construction of a beautiful temple, where all of the voices of Pentecost sing together, where the saints and martyrs from every nation process to the throne, and we kneel in humble adoration, and in that moment we are one.

**By grace you have been saved through faith,
And this is the gift of God, not the result of works,
lest anyone should boast.
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 broken down the dividing wall,
That is, the hostility that is between us.
He 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,
And might reconcile both groups into one body
through the cross.**