

18 October 2020
Ephesians 2:11-22, Bridge Builders
International Witness Sunday
First Mennonite Church, Saskatoon

We live in a world of walls.
There was the Berlin Wall,
built to separate communist
East Germany from capitalist



West Germany. There is the ancient Hadrian Wall in England, built by the Romans in AD122 to keep out the barbarians. The Great Wall of China was built by the Chinese to keep out the

barbaric foreigners. There is the Israeli-West Bank Wall, and the much talked about US-Mexico border wall. These walls are all designed to separate and divide people. Walls separate and divide.



There are physical walls like these, but there are invisible walls too. Travel to any country where people speak a different language and you immediately run

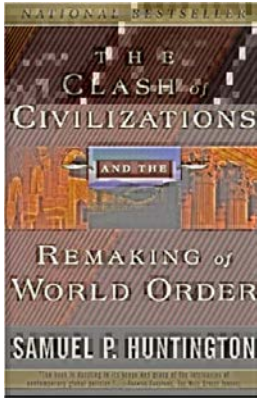
into a giant insurmountable language wall. There are language walls.



Years ago, when I travelled to India, I needed to change how I paid for things. I'm left-handed and usually give money to a store clerk with my left-hand. Traditionally, in India, your left hand was for personal hygiene while the right

hand was for eating, shaking hands and so on. So, giving money to someone else using your left hand was offensive as the left hand was unclean. There are cultural walls.

Walls not only separate and divide but they also serve as a **metaphor** for fear, mistrust and even hate. Thick high walls of fear, obstacles of mistrust, and at times, insurmountable barriers of hate.



Years ago, Samuel Huntington, a US political scientist and professor, wrote a book called, *“The Clash of Civilizations”*. In the book Huntington argued that in today’s world the greatest source of conflict is not between political ideologies like communism or capitalism, but between people of different cultures, languages, and religions, in short, between civilizations. There are walls between the civilizations.

I think of that invisible yet colossal wall that existed between Esau and Jacob after Jacob, with the help of his mum, Rebecca, stole Esau’s birth-right. Esau vowed to kill Jacob, so Jacob fled for his life.

I also think of the wall of enmity that existed between the Jews and Gentiles in the NT. From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were pagans who did not know the true God. Gentiles, according to Ephesians, had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). During Jesus’ time, many Jews considered Gentiles, “unclean” calling them “dogs” and “the uncircumcision.” Gentiles and the half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed as enemies and shunned. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well and asked for a drink of water, the woman said to Jesus, *‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans. John 4:9)*. Or when Peter dreamt about the sheet of unclean food, and the voice telling him to kill and eat, Peter responded saying, *“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (Acts 10:14)*. If food from another culture is profane and unclean, what does that say about the people who eat that food?

The book of Ephesians picks up on this history using the words aliens, strangers, and dividing walls describe the broken relationship and deep fear between these two groups of people.

But into this world of walls came Jesus.

*“But 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” (Ephesians 2:13-14)*

In Christ, the wall is down, and in its place, a bridge. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus brought down the walls of fear, mistrust, and hate. Salvation is the bridge and it is accomplished by God. We are reconciled to God, which

means that God has overcome the alienation between us and God through Christ and has established a new and peaceful relationship. When we kneel at the foot of the cross there is no room for a wall. God's reconciling work is a reminder to us that it's not our own doing, our good works, or our culture or tradition that got us into God's Kingdom. We didn't earn our way into the Kingdom. We are here because Christ reached out to us, won us back to God, and removed the wall separating us from God. Through Christ, God made peace with us by faith alone. It's God's grace.

With the gift of salvation comes the gift of association. The bridge is not just between you and God, but between you, me, and others in the church. The good news in all of this is that now all Christians of all shapes and sizes, races and creeds, genders, and colours, are one in Christ. Like the kernels of wheat ground up into flour to make a loaf of bread, so to were Jews and Gentiles forged together into a new humanity, the church. From the cross Christ reached out and embraced all, forgave all, and loved all.

We need to be clear here. The author of Ephesians is not saying that God will break down the walls someday or that God will heal our divisions someday. Christ has already done this. These old divisions, old barriers, old hatreds, old walls that humans have physically built around the world, or walls of mistrust, fear and hate that we build in our hearts and minds no longer have power over us, unless of course, we allow them to have power over us.

Our task is to simply respond to what Christ has done by working to break down walls of mistrust, fear, and hate and build bridges where God can work to bring peace and reconciliation. How do we do this?

It seems I'm often telling you stories about when I lived in China. Today is no exception. The Suderman family went to China in 1998. While we lived in China, we got to experience first-hand this invisible wall of mistrust and fear existing between the Chinese and me, a Westerner. It wasn't a visible wall that you could see with your eyes, but an invisible one. Many times, you could feel it, sense it. As tiny cogs in God's universal and cosmic plan to unite all things in heaven and earth, the Mennonite tried to find creative ways to break down these walls of mistrust and fear, and, in their place, build bridges of trust, bridges of understanding, bridges of relationships in the hope and expectation that God's Spirit would move and bring peace.

One of the creative wall-breaking/bridge building things I was deeply involved in was to bring a Mennonite high school choir to China to sing in different cities and in various venues. These high school students not only shared the wonderful gift of music with the Chinese, but they also learnt more about the Chinese people and their rich culture through personal contact.

In addition to having the choir sing, we also created space so that these young people from the US and Chinese students could interact on a personal level. And in this holy space, we trusted that God would work.

The Chinese who heard the choir and met the choir members got to listen to some wonderful music and learnt to know a real living person from the USA. Music has an incredible way of squeezing through any crack in the walls of mistrust and hate around our hearts and minds, shattering them so the music, the musicians and singers can touch our hearts. Once our hearts are touched, the wall is down, friends, and we can finally see another's face. God works in these situations.

You see, the choir and the power of music was the vehicle we used to rip down the wall and bridge the gap between cultures. It was our meagre attempt to remove the barriers of mistrust and fear that too often characterized Chinese and Western relationships, and in its place build bridges of understanding in the hope and expectation that God's Spirit was moving to create peace.

This isn't rocket science, friends. Sometimes we think that in order to true witnesses, faithful workers in God's kingdom that we need to go abroad, head overseas to share the gospel. No, you don't need to do this. Of course, the church is a global body, and having these global connections and relationships are vitally important. But we can be wall breakers and bridge builders right here in Saskatoon. Since we discussed FIM at our annual meeting yesterday, I'll use that as an example. As you know, the FIM class is an exercise class not just for FMC folks but for anyone interested in physical fitness. But, when you're there you're not just exercising, you're having coffee together, you are having conversations with others, sharing stories, and building relationships. It is through those interactions, those ordinary conversations, those small efforts at relationship-building, that we are breaking down walls.

God is with us when we reach over the barriers, is with us when we take the risk of learning to know a stranger, is with us when conversations happen. It's during these times when God's ever present, ever mysterious Spirit works at

transformation, not just with the other person but with you and me as well. Reaching out to others requires trust. It requires hope and that God is working to create something new.

As this is International Witness Sunday, I will once again shift our focus internationally, again to China. Currently, FMC is financially and prayerfully supporting George and Tobia V. As you see by the insert in the bulletin, the Veiths are also working in different ways as bridge builders in God's cosmic plan of the redemption of all things.

Another example is Bock Ki and Sook Kyong. Here's a short video of their work.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHYB6DLUaXk>

You see, God has a plan of salvation. This plan is not just for the salvation of individual souls but the salvation of the world, including salvation of animals, birds, fish, plants, rocks, trees...in other words, all things. **All things**, as Ephesians 1, put it, are part of God's plan of salvation. And this passage in Ephesians 2:11-22 is all about the reconstitution of humanity. God's plan to create a new human. A new human rooted not in a peculiar culture, language, or race but in Christ. *For Christ is our peace.*

God in Christ has done away with the wall. Our task is to simply respond to what Christ has done by living and working in small ways to break down walls of mistrust, fear, and hate, and in its place, build bridges of reconciliation and peace.
Amen