



22 August 2021
Ephesians 2:11-22
Joined together in Christ
First Mennonite Church

When I began this sermon series on Ephesians back in July, I told you the central theme of this letter was found in Ephesians 1:10:
God set forth in Christ, *as a plan for the fullness of time, to*

gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

The centre piece of God's strategic plan, the goal towards which God is taking all of creation and history, is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. **All things** is the Greek way of saying **everything**—people, water, animals, plants, insects, air, rocks—everything in the cosmos will be gathered up by God reconciled and restored to how God intended it from the dawn of creation.

Today's theme, joined together in Christ, is part of God's grand and gracious story of gathering all things in Christ. The formation of a new community, a new humanity, joined together in common devotion and worship to Jesus Christ is part of God's cosmic gospel plan to gather all things.

Except too often people of faith have reduced God's cosmic gospel of amazing grace into something small and often petty. Years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a popular book, *Your God is Too Small*. Perhaps that phrase could be written over most of the religion of our age. Our God is too small, too understood, too flattened, too much reduced to our size. It is said that Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week. Christians who profess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour gather on Sunday separated and divided into racial, socioeconomic, ethnic, political, and theological camps. Can you think of instances where Christians have domesticated God, made God small, shrunk the gospel to the point where it's good news for us but fire and brimstone for others?

We could offer many examples of how we have shrunk the gospel through Paul's



image of walls found here in Ephesians 2. We live in a world of walls. A couple of days ago, I was saddened to read about Greece's desire to protect itself from what many anticipate, will be a flood of Afghan refugees into their country by building a 40km wall on its border with Turkey.

While a wall may help Greece avoid another migrant crisis like they experienced in 2015 when more than a million people fleeing war and poverty, I'm certain it won't protect them from war and poverty. Back in 2002, Israel began building its contentious 4m high wall in the occupied West Bank, claiming that it was necessary to protect them against terrorism. Palestinians called it a racial segregation or apartheid wall. If you follow the news, you know the wall hasn't protected Israel from fear and violence coming into their country. I've had the privilege of walking on one of the world's most famous walls, the Great Wall of China. It was built by the Chinese to keep out the barbaric foreigners. In my reading of the history of the Great Wall, I discovered that it didn't do what it was designed to do, that is, bring lasting peace, security, and protection; anger, revolution, and war often began with those inside the wall, and these things tore the country apart.



These are physical walls, 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. Have you ever tried to purchase food in a restaurant or tried to get from point A to point B without knowing the local language? Next to impossible. These invisible walls can be language, but they

can also be cultural. There are huge cultural walls between Indigenous peoples and European settlers. There are racial walls between blacks and whites in some parts of the world.

Walls not only separate and divide but they also serve as a metaphor for fear, mistrust, and hate.

It's no wonder that the Bible uses the metaphor of a wall to describe the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles, as you know, were non-Jews, like you and me. In stereotypical language Paul reminds us Gentiles of our outsider status— *“remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”*

To say that Gentiles have no hope, since hope resides in the favour of God, is much like saying they are without God. The author employs a term unique in the NT—**atheoi**, a Greek word from which we get the word **atheist** from. This term expresses a Jewish insiders' stereotypical judgment on Gentile outsiders. In Jewish eyes Gentiles were as atheistic as were Jews in the eyes of Gentiles. Nothing expresses more succinctly a state of hopelessness than to be without God in the cosmos. And that is exactly how Jews viewed Gentiles: hopelessly adrift in the universe.

During Jesus' time, many Jews considered Gentiles “unclean,” calling them “dogs” and “the uncircumcision.” Gentiles and the half-Jew/half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed as enemies to be shunned. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well and asked for a drink of water, the stunned 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.” To which God's Spirit responded, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ 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 human division, physical and invisible 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. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus brought down the walls of fear, mistrust, and hate. Salvation is accomplished by God. When we kneel at the foot of the cross there is no room for a wall. Christ’s work reminds 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, kicked down 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. We are joined together in Christ and with others in the church. 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. Now, the breaking down of the wall is not an end in itself. The point of destruction is the construction of a new humanity. On page 77 in our hymnbook, we have a song written by Brian Wren called, God of many names. In that hymn Wren calls Christ the “Carpenter of new creation.” That’s a wonderful image of Christ first destroying enmity in order that he might construct a new human in the place of two, thus making peace (2:15). How do we participate in this work?

I grew up in a community where people from other denominations, the Anglicans, Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and others weren't nearly as close to God as were the Mennonites.

Over the years I have had the privilege of getting to know many people from other denominations. I think of one of my seminary professors, Mac W. who was from the United Church of Canada. When I was a pastor in Aberdeen, I got to know Father Bedard, a Catholic priest. Then when I lived in China, I learnt to know Andrew and Jemma, Anglican priests from New Zealand, Joan, a Lutheran from the US, and Beth, a S. Baptist also from the US.

Now, I can no longer say that people from other denominations aren't nearly as close to God as Mennonites are. Why? Because, now when I think of Roman Catholics, I no longer see a formidable wall, but now I see a face. I see the face of Father Bedard. When I think of the Anglican Church, I don't see a denominational wall, but I see the face of Andrew Cole and Jemma Allen.

With the gift of salvation comes the gift of being joined together. Jews and Gentiles brought together into the church and invited by God to love each other. To learn to love each other even though we read our bibles differently, eat different foods, or vote for different political parties. Before the apostle Peter could even see the new thing God was doing in the life of Cornelius, Peter first had to be converted, transformed from his own prejudice and aversion to Gentiles through the dream of unclean food. Our challenge today is no different—we are invited by God to move beyond our own prejudices, bias, and and suspicions of others to break down barriers by learning to know strangers. We do this by building loving and trusting relationships with others. When we do this, God is at work transforming hearts, minds, and lives in God's construction of a new human.

We must keep our eyes fixated on the carpenter from Nazareth who jumped over all sorts of barriers, reached across cultural and religious divides to meet and converse with people. This same God who raised Jesus from the dead joined Jew and Gentile together into a new humanity is at work in our world today. 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 relationships with others in the hope that God can join diverse people into this living, breathing body, we call the church. Amen.