



“Breaking Down Walls”

Text: Ephesians 2:11-14

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Once upon a time...

in a beautiful country, filled with every good and beautiful thing, lived a beautiful girl and a beautiful boy who had a beautiful friendship. Everyone in the country was happy. They smiled and laughed and enjoyed each other’s company. The fields of the country were beautiful and produced abundantly so that there was no need. The animals - both wild and domestic - fed without fear. The air was sweet, the water clean, the soil rich and fertile.

One day an argument broke out. No one remembers what it was about. Probably not much, which is the way most arguments begin. No one remembers who started it. No one remembers anything much about it, except that people didn’t smile quite so much.

Still, as arguments tend to do, the argument grew into an controversy. The controversy escalated into a feud. Before long the argument became an altercation.

The beautiful land and its beautiful people slowly became crude and coarse. They yelled at each other. They called each other names. They forbade their children from playing with other children.

Finally, the beautiful land and its previously beautiful people divided into two lands and peoples and a huge wall was built to separate the people from each other. The wall divided fields from fields, wells from wells, animals from animals, and people from people. The wall divided families from families and friends from friends. The wall became a scar that ran the length of the land.

Yet, the beautiful girl and the beautiful boy continued to be beautiful friends. While others would gather at the wall and yell at the unseen people on the other side, all the beautiful girl and beautiful boy could think of was how beautiful it would be for the wall to be gone and for everyone to be happy and smile and laugh.

The wall stood for a very long time. The longer the wall stood the more anger and antagonism grew. Bitterness increased. People began to be happy that the wall was there.

The beautiful girl and beautiful boy threw messages over the wall to each other. They concocted a plan. They would go to work, breaking through the wall. They would choose a place in the wall where people did not gather and they would work - each from their own side - to break through the wall.

So, each day, for years and years, the two went to the place in the wall and, with hammers and chisels, chipped away at the wall. Years passed and the beautiful girl and the beautiful boy became beautiful teenagers and then beautiful young adults. More years passed, and the wall chippers became beautiful grown ups.

By and by, after decades, the day came when only one stone stood between them. The beautiful old lady and the beautiful old man, worn and wearied by their lifetime of work, struggled to pick up their hammers and pound away at the final stone. Whack after whack, the stone seemed impenetrable. Still, with all the strength and life force they had, they kept striking the rock.

Finally, both of the wall chippers, summoning all of the strength that remained in their tired and worn bodies and struck the rock with a blow that fractured the stone and it fell apart.

People on both sides of the wall came to see what was going on. They stooped to look through the hole in the wall. For the first time it was possible to see the country on both sides of the wall.

And it was beautiful. The grass was green on both sides of the wall. The sky was blue on both sides of the wall. The people were the same on both sides of the wall.

And for the first time, for as long as they could remember, the beautiful old woman and the beautiful old man could see each other's eyes. The beautiful old woman saw the beautiful young boy. The beautiful old man saw the beautiful young girl. They smiled at each other and touched the other's hand. And then, they took their last breath and died.

When the people saw what they had given their lives to, and how they cared for each other and for them, the people began tearing down the wall. They began to smile and to laugh. They remembered what it was like to be happy.

And it was beautiful.

“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.”

As we make our Lenten journey on “The Way to Shalom,” we are searching for wholeness where there is brokenness. We are looking for happiness where there are tears. We are watching for health where there is illness. We are trying to discover how God’s shalom can be realized in our world.

This week, in particular, we are exploring how justice leads to peace. The two are inextricably bound together. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
The effect of righteousness will be peace,
and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.
My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.

In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. visited Santa Rita Jail in California, where protesters against the Vietnam War were imprisoned. There, he drew the connection between justice and peace. King said, “There can be no justice without peace. And there can be no peace without justice.”

In 1972, Pope Paul VI put it quite simply:

“If you want Peace, work for Justice.”

Peace and justice are two sides of the same coin.

It is the presence of injustice that divides people, nurtures separation, hinders the full development of human potential, and mars the image of God in far too many of our sisters and brothers. In the very place where we would expect to find peace - in Israel and Palestine - peace is as elusive as a unicorn’s horn. Our nation is fractured and splintered along more fault lines than we are willing to see or admit. Entire groups of people are mistreated and maligned because of the color of their skin, or the nation from which they came, or because they hold one set of beliefs that differ from our own, or because of who they love. The poor are mistreated and held down. Women are denied the same opportunities as men. Neighborhoods are unsafe and the sound of gunfire is heard far too often. Persons with disabilities are denied the supports they need to survive and thrive.

The walls that divide us are legion. Peace eludes us. What can be done?

“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.”

Jesus Christ has chipped away at the dividing walls between us and has opened the way to a new life that is grounded in peace. He has taken away the hostilities and enmities that have, for too long, divided us from one another. He has broken down the walls we erected to keep some in and others out.

And those who would be his faithful and authentic disciples should take on that work as well. We are called give our time, our talents, our treasures, and our energies to the destruction of all the walls that separate people from each other. We are invited to stand with and for those who have no one to speak on their behalf. We are challenged to

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow.

We are commissioned to go wherever there is brokenness and bring forth wholeness and equity and completeness.

This is the work of those who would be Christ’s dear ones. This is the challenging way of life to which those who have been touched by God’s grace are called to live. This is the call of our Lenten observance.

“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.”

If Jesus Christ has broken down the dividing wall, should we not break down the walls of injustice that prevent the presence of peace?

“There can be no justice without peace. And there can be no peace without justice.”

“If you want Peace, work for Justice.”

Let us take up that work. For now and evermore. Amen.