

EPHESIANS WEEK#4 - SJGC

Reconciled Through Christ

JEFF

Last week, we explored the first half of Ephesians chapter 2, where Paul speaks to the individual Christian believer, addressing the question of **our identity**. Most contemporary sociologists today suggest that the fundamental question people are asking today is, **“Who am I?”**

And Paul's focus in this chapter is on **our changed identity**. **You were once dead in your sins BUT now God has made us alive in Christ.** A seminary professor once told me that if you want to find the gospel in a text, look for the word BUT, because BUT is always the turning point.

Here in the second half of chapter 2, Paul is continuing to explore that issue of identity, but now it is our COMMUNAL IDENTITY. **“Who are we?”** now as a community in Christ. And we'll find that the little word BUT shows up again here as a gospel solution to a human problem.

Of course, the problem that Paul is identifying here, as far as community is concerned is **divisions**. And in order to give us a visual image of what **division** looks like, Paul uses the term **“WALLS OF HOSTILITY.”**

You don't have to go too far to discover WALLS OF HOSTILITY that divide people these days. Or any days, for that matter. Unfortunately, as sinful human beings, conflict seems to be one of our most common default modes.

It is true at the **global level**, where nations are constantly clashing against one another in a struggle for power. It's true at the **national level**. The mudslinging between Republicans and Democrats is just going to get worse the closer we get to November. It was true in the **back seat of our car** when our kids were little. It was like our sweet, innocent little children drew an imaginary line between them and then spit out the venomous words, “Mom, she's touching me!”

Today divisions or race, gender, economics, and politics, threaten to divide us every bit as much as in Paul's day.

PATTI

And then there are **interpersonal conflicts** that arise from misunderstanding or offense.

Think about conflict that you may be experiencing in your life right now.

Is it with a spouse?

A co-worker?

A neighbor?

With someone at church?

That conflict, whatever it is, is like a **BRICK WALL** that has been built up between you and that person or that group of people.

How do you build a wall? **One brick at a time**, right?

Each of those bricks are moments in time.

They are **actions taken**,

words spoken,

love withheld.

A bitter accusation.

A hateful comment.

A cold shoulder.

Brick after brick is laid down until, sometimes the wall is so high and so thick that it seems impossible to change.

Can you see that wall in your mind?

The question for us today is,

“How can we break down this wall?”

JEFF

The movie, War Horse takes place during World War I. In one scene, the British army entrenched on one side and the German army entrenched on the other. The battle has been raging for months.

These men are mercilessly destroying one another by shooting bullets into each other's bodies, skewering each other with bayonets, and filling each other's lungs with toxic mustard gas.

It's horrific, but in the midst of this battle,
a horse gets free and starts running.
In the middle of this battle, a horse gets free and starts running.
The horse runs through a bunch of barbed wire and gets so tangled up that
its trapped on the battlefield right in between the two armies.

And two men on opposite sides of the battle,
who were about to kill each other
stopped fighting long enough to work together to
to free this defenseless animal.

They come together in a bond of peace
out of shared compassion.
And for a moment, the walls fell down. It is possible.

But sadly, after that moment, after the horse was freed,
the wall went right back up,
and these men resumed killing each other.

So the question remains. How can we
break down this wall of hostility
that separates us from one another?

PATTI

Our text from Ephesians 2 addresses this very issue.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter from prison.

It's important to note this fact because
the reason he is in prison is because
he was accused of breaching a wall.

The Temple that sat in the heart of Jerusalem
was a series of walled in courtyards.
And in the center is the Temple itself.

Only priests were allowed inside the Temple itself,
because it represented the very presence of God.
Even then, only one priest was allowed to go into
the Most Holy Place, and even then, only once a year.

Then the next courtyard was called **the Court of Israel**.
Which meant that only **circumcised male Jews** were allowed to come in here.
You know, I've always wondered how they checked that.

Talk about an awkward way to start a worship service...
I know, that was bad.

The next courtyard was **the court of women**.
Again, only Jewish women were allowed here.

Then, way out on the side, was **the Court of the Gentiles**.
If you were not a Jew, you were not welcome beyond that point.

Imagine what our worship space would be like
if it were under these rules.

We'd have a big curtain around the altar, and only **Pastor Seth**
could go there once a year. Then another curtain around the chancel,
and only **Seth and I** would be allowed to step foot in there.

Male members of St. John's would be allowed to sit in the pews.
Female members could stand in the Narthex and look in. And
Everybody else would stand outside in the heat or cold.

JEFF

Wow, I think we underestimate how excluded lots of people probably felt,
and how superior others probably considered themselves to be.

But at any rate, Paul had been out
traipsing around the countryside,
interacting with **GENTILES**.
Making friends with them and
Sharing Christ with them.
He even brought some Gentiles back to Jerusalem with him.

And he's sitting in jail because he was accused of bringing
one of these Gentile friends of his into one of
these forbidden temple spaces, beyond the first gate.
That's why the powers that be wanted to kill Paul.

It's all about protecting their privilege and status and
self-righteousness.

We're taking time to map this out because
when Paul speaks of a wall of hostility,
he is not just speaking in the abstract.

PATI

Right. He's talking about a physical wall - this visual representation of the division and exclusion of people from the community of God's people.

And as such, this passage breaks down into two main parts.
BEFORE and **AFTER**.

In the before part, Paul says:

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)— **12** remember that at that time **you were SEPARATE from Christ, EXCLUDED from citizenship in Israel and FOREIGNERS to the covenants of the promise, WITHOUT HOPE and WITHOUT GOD in the world.**

Here's the key phrase in the whole passage - remember that little word that can help us find the gospel? It's really two words here...
BUT NOW. Say it with me. **BUT NOW...**

This phrase in **v. 13** is the turning point. Something has changed because of Jesus. Look at how central Jesus is this section.

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15** by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. **17** He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. **18** For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

This is the Gospel. This is the good news. We tend to define ourselves over and against other people,

in order to make ourselves look better by comparison.

Whenever we do this, we are **justifying ourselves** and **judging** people who are different by **looking down our noses** at them.

JEFF

I remember when our youngest daughter, Hannah, was about 5 years old, and she told us that she liked both Ohio State AND Michigan.

**We told her that this was impossible.
Buckeyes – GOOD. Wolverines – BAD.
But she saw NO CONFLICT whatsoever.
No reason to make a distinction.**

**And while I'm not sure even Jesus can overcome that division,
In a much more serious way,
He has put to death the hostility between all kinds of diverse groups and individuals through his death on the cross!**

As Church, we proclaim this all the time.
But how does it work, exactly?
What really happened at Calvary
to break down the wall of hostility?

Think of it this way...
The biggest, tallest, most insurmountable wall of hostility
in the universe is **the wall we human beings built between us and God.**

How many times have we hurt God by our
pettiness, and anger,
and lying, and cheating,
and on and on?

If anyone had the right to be hostile toward us it would be God.
We have spurned the Lord's commandments and then
convinced ourselves that we are merely
sufferers in need of a solution
rather than sinners in need of a Savior.

PATTI

But God looks at us... He looks at you and says,

"I have died to the wall.

I've died to your sin and to the many times

you've have hurt me, and others. I forgive you, and I love you."

And when Christ looks at us with that eternal love,
all the bricks just vanish.

Then Jesus looks at the walls of hostility that still remain between us and says,
"I've knocked this down. I have proclaimed peace. How 'bout it?"

What about your wall today?

Look at each of those bricks.

Can you name them?

Those hurtful things that you want to cling to?

Once you were defined by them.

Once there was another person or group of people
far off on the other side, and you on this side.

But now. BUT. NOW... because of God's love demonstrated in Jesus,
and through the power of God's Spirit moving between us,

we can let go of the past, and
forgive the bricks, and
work toward a future of peace.

JEFF

Of course, we know its more complicated than that.

We know that in 20 minutes we can't even
scratch the surface of how to do this.

We understand that there are legitimate times
when people need to be kept apart, at least for a season.

However, we also know that many, many times those of us who
claim to follow Christ **hide behind these walls** and
use them as an excuse for NOT LOVING
the way Jesus calls us to love.

PATTI

So maybe this week you could think about that wall that exists **between you and that other person**, or **between you and that other group of people**.

And simply start with **ONE BRICK**.
Choose one thing that someone has done to you.
Write it down. Ask God to give you the strength to smash it.

In reality, Jesus has smashed it already.
So just let yourself see it dissolve.
And then speak it out loud and tell someone.
We'd love to hear your story.

One brick at a time, let's let the walls fall down.

PRAYER: