

The title of this sermon, “Tear Down That Wall!” is a quote from former President Ronald Reagan. It was in a speech on June 12, 1987, and it was concerning the Berlin wall, which was built to separate East and West Germany. East Germany was Communist; West Germany was not. The wall stood from 1961-1989.

It was quite a wall—it was sturdy, of course, as walls are supposed to be. And it had a lot of meaning, because of the political systems the wall divided. There was a lot of controversy. There was violence when people tried to get over that wall.

Well, the wall was finally torn down. Germany became a united country once again. It was a wall that needed to come down, and it did.

Some walls just need to come down; some of those walls are real, solid things, and some of those walls are in our minds and attitudes.

In the Scripture lesson from Ephesians, both kinds of walls are referred to and discussed. This is what it says in my Bible notes (Oxford New Revised Standard Version):

“The dividing wall [mentioned in verse 14] [is] an allusion to the barrier in the Temple at Jerusalem separating the court of Israel from the court of the Gentiles.

[There was a Jewish area and a non-Jewish area.] Gentiles who trespassed the barrier did so on pain of death, as warning notices proclaimed.”

Wow! Sounds like a scary place to worship.

Then there was the other kind of wall—the attitude of hostility between the Jewish people and the non-Jewish people.

Now, this is not to say that the religion of the Jewish people was a bad thing. The author Luke Johnson put it this way:

“The problem lay not with Torah or temple as such, but with the human hostility that perverted even the gracious gifts of God into signs of . . .

[self-glorification] and rivalry and boasting—all the signs, in short, of hostility.”

But isn't that just our imperfect human nature? God gives us a gift, and we turn it into a fight. Who's better? Who doesn't count? Who doesn't matter?

It almost sounds like bratty kids at a birthday party, doesn't it?

However, one of Jesus' purposes was to unite human beings—the Jewish people and the non-Jewish—also called Gentiles.

Yes, the Jewish people had a rich and wonderful heritage as God's chosen people. They had long worshiped God. They had been blessed with the gifts of the Ten Commandments, and the prophets, and the Psalms. The Old Testament, the majority of the Bible, was theirs!

The Gentiles, also called the Romans and Greeks, had a heritage of learning, culture, medicine, art, and philosophy. Those were gifts from God, too, even though they didn't recognize them as such.

And Jesus had come to bring salvation to both groups of people, all groups of people. Because of this, there could be peace and harmony between the groups.

Each group had sins to answer for—in their distortion of the gifts they'd received from God. As it says in verse 15 (The Message):

[Jesus] repealed the Jewish law code that . . . had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped.”

We know that happens; we’ve seen it in our own country. We started out with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and right away the Bill of Rights got added. Then more and more amendments and laws were made and now we have more than we can count!

That reminds me of an old comedy portion of the Tonight Show, several years back, when Johnny Carson was the host. He presented American laws that make no sense, but are still on the books. The one I especially remember was that, in New Jersey, I think, it’s against the law to drop “a tainted pickle on the sidewalk.” I suppose that had once been a big problem, but there it was, still in the laws.

But that’s what the Jewish people had done with the basic laws of their religion. However, the Ten Commandments are not that hard to learn and understand. Hard to keep, maybe—but that’s a different story.

The Romans and Greeks—well, even though God had blessed them with learning, education, philosophy, and medicine—these were the people who left unwanted babies on the hillsides to die. These were the folks who worshiped dozens of different gods and goddesses, with so-called religious rites that would make Hugh Hefner blush.

Now, though, it wouldn’t have to be that way! The groups of people could start over, fresh, in the faith called Christianity. Their sins and errors could be forgiven—and they could all be at peace with one another—all of this as God’s gracious gift—through Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection. How wonderful!

And yet—we sometimes forget this peace, this harmony we can have as Christian people. Just think of Ireland! It has always bothered me so much that the Catholics and Protestants are in violent opposition there. Couldn’t they read this portion of the Bible? Couldn’t they at least call themselves different names, like the A’s and B’s? Catholic and Protestant are supposed to be good words!

Our own country has done this, too. We have this section of town, where those people must not go. We had water fountain labeled as to who could use them, and who could not. We have Native American reservations for the folks who were here in this country in the first place, before the rest of us got here!

We just keep building walls—real ones and attitude ones, between people.

There was a poem by Robert Frost, “Mending Wall.” I had to read it in high school, did you? Anyway, there are two lines that relate to the subject:

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”

And “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.”

We build up walls in our own minds, our own attitudes. Those may be the worst walls, the walls of attitude. We take the attitude—let’s leave those people out and we’ll prove how great we are. Bad attitudes, and bad walls.

There is something better to build than all these walls—what God is building:

“God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.”

(The Message, Ephesians 2: 19b-22)

How wonderful that we can stop building the wrong kind of walls, and become part of God's building materials!

Amen.

(by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters)