

## Tearing Down Walls

### Proper 11, Year B – Ephesians 2:11-22

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson July 22, 2012*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

The other day, when my thoughts for this morning's sermon were still just beginning to brew, I went looking for something that I hadn't seen for a while. I like to keep little reminders of the past. I guess a lot of us do that sort of thing. But, you know me, I love a good story, so I have a lot of collections of such tokens scattered around the house.

I finally found the particular cache I was looking for in a black leather-trimmed... valet thingy that I used to use as an everyday catch-all on my dresser, into which I would throw my wallet and my keys and my comb and whatever every evening so I could scoop them out again the next morning and put them back into whichever pocket they had come from. Eventually, though, the valet thingy got filled up with semi-permanent resident objects and was thus relegated to archival status in the top of the cherry chest of drawers in my room at the house in Clarksville, behind a collection of postcards from my trip to the Holy Land, and underneath an old corduroy shirt that has sentimental value to Jenny and me.

Among the treasures, I found the dog-tags I wore during my time in the service, including the little medallion of St. Michael the Archangel, patron saint of paratroopers. I found a lapel pin from my equally perilous service at the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Minneapolis in 2003. I found the silver dollar given to me by a friend to celebrate his 25 years of sobriety, about a month before he was killed by a drunk driver. I found the Swiss Army knife with the Boys Scouts symbol on it that I got for myself when I presented each of my boys with a similar red one as they earned their Scout Whittlin' Chip giving them the right to carry such a boy-wonderful tool. And finally I found this small piece of rock, a chip of concrete, actually, no bigger than half an inch by a quarter of an inch, with a few flecks of black and white paint on one side. It's a good thing that nobody else goes poking around in my little catch-all thingy, because they would no doubt assume that this rock was something that I pried out of one of the little gaps on the bottom of my sneakers. Like everything else, however, it is part of a story, a small piece of history, actually.

In 1989, the Martindale family lived in Baumholder, a little town in western Germany. It was a very interesting and *dangerous* time to live in Germany, especially for those of us that, like me, were part of the U.S. military presence charged with maintaining a precarious balance of power in what had become one of the hottest spots of the forty-year so-called Cold War. As the '80s came to a close, the Soviet Union was collapsing. And as it did, the nations of Eastern Europe were either liberated, or left to fend for themselves, depending on your perspective, for the first time since the war that had nearly destroyed them. For many in Germany it was a time of pure joy as friends and families that had been torn apart began to move across borders that had been closed for decades. Those of us under arms had decidedly mixed emotions as we looked on at high alert status, because the only thing more dangerous than a heavily armed enemy on the other side of a border, is having no idea *what's* going on the other side of the border.

On November 9, 1989, the wall that had been constructed nearly a half century earlier to divide the old capital of the united Germany was literally hacked to pieces by picks and shovels and hammers – from both sides. I would very much have liked to have gone to Berlin to see history unfold itself in the space of a couple of days. But I was the administrator of a hospital that was operating at full capacity trying to help the streams of refugees from the east that had quickly become whole *rivers* of human need. In addition, because history seldom unfolds itself without repercussion, our unit was on the alert against the possibility of sudden calamity – so I was not free to get away. But one of friends did. The little, non-descript chip of concrete that has taken up residence for now in the bottom of a little catch-all thingy in Clarksville, Tennessee is a fragment

of the wall that physically separated several million people from one another and symbolically separated the whole *world*, for a time.

I went looking for this little piece of gravel this week to help me think through what it can mean for us to break down the walls that divide *us*. It seems to me that as a race, humankind is considerably more adept, and decidedly more *inclined* to building walls than we are to tearing them down. In spite of the “progress” of the modern age, it seems that we are getting much better at the former, than we are at the latter. With all our technological advances, with a communications revolution that rivals that of the fifteenth century development of the printing press, with the ability to fill our eyes and our ears and our minds with mind-*numbing* mountains of input every nano-second of the day, with an exponentially expanding grasp of the physical dimensions of the world around us, we are still remarkably adept at building barriers, at putting up walls, at distinguishing “us” from “them.” With maybe not so many apologies to poet Robert Frost, something there is in us that really loves a wall.

We carefully and precisely and way too *energetically* define our “us-ness,” we humans. And we even *more* carefully define everyone else’s “them-ness.” Maybe we build those definitions on the basis of color, or tribe, or language, or accent. Maybe we build them on education, or pedigree, or some perceived *moral* superiority. Maybe we build them on economic status, or political or social affiliation, or style of worship. We *always* build them by focusing on self – and by defining everything else as somehow less worthy of consideration. If we cannot reinforce those distinctions with rock and concrete, we do so at the point of a gun, or with a closed political process, or with a cash register. With war or with oppression or with simple smug superiority, we make sure that “they” understand that “we” are right and that they are either so backward, or so blind, or so... insignificant that their existence either offends us or simply doesn’t matter at all.

But for those of us who claim the name of Jesus Christ, that is *not* how we are called to build our lives. If we were able to look at the blueprints of the life that Christ would help us build, we might be quite surprised at the remarkably open floor plan, because the plan of the Gospel simply does not provide for *walls*. The rooms of our hearts are not to be ordered by our pride-filled posturing, or by our petty preferences and prejudices, or even by our firmly held convictions of what forms the central core of who we are. The architecture of our heart is to be absolutely and completely dominated by the one who made us, and sustains us, and sanctifies us.

In his flesh, Paul says in this morning’s epistle reading, Christ has “broken down the dividing walls” that separate us. In bringing “peace to those that are far off and to those that are near,” Jesus Christ calls each of us to focus not on those things that distinguish and divide us, but on *his* grace and on *his* holiness and on *his* love. When we leave off building walls based on how the world defines our place, when we leave off building walls based on some self-perceived immutable identity, when we leave off building walls based on our own ideas of superiority, when we begin to understand that everything we are, everything we can ever hope to be, we find only in Christ’s *love* for us, then we *become* Christ’s, we become “members of the household of God,” Paul says, and we “are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

The other day, when my thoughts for this morning’s sermon were still just beginning to brew, I got looking for my little fragment of the wall because I kept humming one verse of an old familiar hymn. I even got Evalyn to put it in as our Communion hymn this morning. Since that’s where I began, maybe that’s a good place to end; you can help me fill in the tune here in a little while: “Just as I am, thy love unknown has broken every barrier down; now to be *thine*, yea, *thine alone*, O Lamb of God, I come.”