

## The Broken Wall and Body (Ephesians 2)

This text from Ephesians focuses on a “broken wall” that has somehow enabled peoples divided from each other, to be united. I’ve been drawn to it, thinking it might have something to say to us in the social chaos and racial hostility of our nation. I recognize that my meditation doesn’t contribute to the theme of Jubilee in a direct way, but I trust it touches some of the pathos of our life and times.

This letter was not written to us in the US, with issues of white supremacy, AfAm slave history, Native genocide, Muslim and Latin immigrants, LGBTQ rights, and of course, 20 centuries of church history and tradition. Rather this text appears to address a single social reality, the division and hostility between Jews and Gentiles, though undoubtedly the reality was more complicated than that.

Nonetheless, are there perhaps some important things for us to learn from this text?

At the heart of this passage is the metaphor of a “wall” that was removed, i.e., a barrier of some kind that divided Jews and Gentiles, that was abolished. This removal allowed the creation of a new reality—a new people, a new humanity.

We are not told exactly what the wall between Jews and Gentiles was, except “hostility” or “enmity”; perhaps it’s not too hard to imagine the kinds of things that create enmity between two ethnic groups, no? Somewhat more concretely, scholars have pointed to the literal wall in the Temple between inner and outer courts that barred Gentiles from mixing with Jewish worshippers. This wall was destroyed, along with the whole Temple, in 70 A.D. Or, some suggest, the dividing wall is the curtain in the Temple that was ripped open at the hour of Jesus’ death; this curtain shielded the Holy of Holies from human view and routine access and thus separated, not people from people, but people from God—torn open, this symbolizes access to God.

Perhaps more understandable to us might be the barriers that exist between and among peoples throughout the world that are created and sustained by invisible principalities and powers. We might think of racism, nationalism, tribalism, wealth, and privilege that bedevil and divide. We think of the manipulation of religion, gender, technology and government that foster abuse and tyranny. We think of forces that erect actual walls of steel and concrete along national borders to protect insiders from outsiders.

The text also does not tell us exactly how this wall of hostility was removed, except that it was related to Christ’s blood and flesh. In other words, the crucifixion of Jesus, along with the resurrection and ascension (1:20-22), somehow destroyed this wall of hostility/hatred that exists between peoples, and between people and God.

What are we to make of this text? Do we—can we—take it seriously? Read again what it says: *With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. So that he could create one new group out of the two groups, making peace.* Does this really happen? Paul describes it in the past tense; did this really happen?

I want to offer three observations that I trust may help show us the way for our own faithfulness:

(1) What did happen in the experience of the earliest Christians? Clearly, breaking down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles was not a single, clean “event”. In Acts 10, we read of the double conversion of Peter, a fervent Jew, and Cornelius, a Gentile centurion: each abruptly transformed and joined to the other by the Holy Spirit through baptism and hospitality, transgressing expectations, customs, and even religious rules. Almost in a moment, or at most over several days, the dividing wall was overcome.

But that was only the beginning of a long, painful process, especially for Peter, who very soon had to answer offended Jews for what God had done. In fact, breaking down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles has been an epic struggle that continues today, in what can seem like more entrenched and complex forms than in the first century.

And yet the NT challenge to disciples of Jesus, expressed so boldly in the text we’re considering is this: **God overcomes border, boundary, and wall**, not only between Jews and Gentiles, but in any circumstance. It is God’s passion, God’s initiative, and our calling. I don’t think we can deny or overlook the message, the mandate, even if we feel daunted by the mission.

(2) “You who once were so far away have been brought near **by the blood of Christ**. **With his body**, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He reconciled both as one body to God **by the cross**, which ended the hostility to God.”

What is noteworthy in this passage is the prominence of Christ’s body and blood in the elimination of the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, something we’ve already noted. Breaking down a wall of hostility, it turns out, involves trauma, bodily pain, bloodshed.

I haven’t been much involved in the conversation some of you are having about the book, My Grandmother’s Hands, but I’ve absorbed from Gretchen and others something of what this book puts forward: the body is a primary carrier of trauma, and strongly influences how we perceive and relate to others, especially if left untouched and unhealed. (John Stoltzfus: “touch matters.”) So perhaps the trauma, torture, and death inflicted on the body of Jesus, and the resurrection of his body, i.e. his healing and restoration, make possible the gift of reconciliation between peoples and persons.

Maybe something of this same process happens to the people engaged in being reconciled; is that possible? In dying with Christ, in baptism and discipleship, say, are we putting ourselves into the dynamic of touching embodied memories of trauma, pain, vengeance, in ourselves, that allow us to be healed and so reconciled with those from whom we’re separated by hostility, whether individuals or groups?

I’m impressed by what Alan Kreider writes about how pagan people were incorporated into the early 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century churches. This often took several years of training, which included not just mental and spiritual training, but learning new physical habits, learning the bodily postures of prayer, the customs of physical embrace (e.g. “holy kiss”), prayers of exorcism and healing, laying on of hands and anointing with oil, all focused on the body, in order to habituate to a new social context.

All this makes me wonder if the breaking down of walls of enmity between groups—or just walls of “otherness”—maybe requires more attention to matters of embodied memory and habits, than we (I, at least) have recognized. I am glad for the new awareness that comes to us as we both assert and surrender our bodies to the incarnated touch of God and others, in the service of reconciliation.

(3) Finally I want to observe that, in the NT context, the two groups becoming one, being joined to the “new humanity”, did not mean losing particularity. In the new social setting, there were still Jews and Gentiles, but the wall of hostility that divided them was gone, abolished. In other words, within the new humanity, there is significant diversity: we are women and men, we are old-timers and newcomers, we are homebodies and activists, retired and employed, straight and gay, black and white, citizens and immigrants. This can bring so much joy and richness to the experience of reconciled life together.

And yet, when we rejoice in our unity, or our diversity-in-unity, there is also a significant challenge. And that simply is a reluctance to face underlying or hidden enmity, the very small walls of hostility that grow among the best of peoples. Agreement and unity can feel so good that festering wounds are ignored, at least for a time.

Jesus anticipated that, and encouraged a way to address those emerging walls—in Matt. 4: “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you...go...be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift.” And in Matt. 18: “when your brother or sister sins, go and point out the fault, just the two of you alone...” Simple, isn’t it? Definitely not! And yet, such courageous initiative can break down walls of hostility—by the grace of God, by the wounds of Jesus! Here again, our bodies can help us, both to know our wounds and to enable our steps toward healing.

So, praise God for the body: for the body of Jesus, broken and raised; for the body of Christ, the new humanity created from the peoples of the earth; for our bodies, marvelous instruments of God’s incarnating, reconciling work among us.

Keith Kingsley, 11 Oct. 2020