

The Uniting Peace of Christ
Ephesians 2:11-22

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Today's sermon is captured in an ancient ritual of the Church known as the Passing of the Peace. You know it because we still use it from time-to-time. *The peace of Christ be with you. And also with you.* May the peace of Christ fill this place.

The year was 1935. The world was feeling the desperation of the Great Depression. A group of ministers got together to see what they could do about it. Out of that gathering came the concept of World Wide Communion Sunday. It was the conviction of that little group of ministers that at least one Sunday a year, Christians of all cultures, all countries, all denominations, all associations, ought to spread a table of hope for all humanity. So today, from Russia to Tennessee, from Africa to Mexico, Christians gather in the sure and certain hope that Christ alone can make us one. *The peace of Christ be with you.*

The apostle Paul put it this way: "He is our peace who has made the two one, and destroyed the dividing wall of hostility." Let's ponder this for a moment on the way to Communion.

CHRIST BREAKS DOWN THE WALLS OF HOSTILITY.

Walls are real. Hostility is horrific. The walls, to which Paul refers, are the walls of the Jerusalem temple. In the house of God, there was a place for Gentiles, a place for women, a place for priests, and a place for the holy of holies. To get out of your place meant sudden and certain death.

The hostility Paul references is between Jews and Gentiles. Jews hated Gentiles. It was unlawful to help a Gentile woman in need. Better for her to die than run the risk of bearing a child. To enter the house of a Gentile was to render a Jew unclean. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl the funeral of that Jewish boy was conducted. He was as good as dead. The walls are real and the hostility is horrific.

Imagine the radical nature of these reconciling words. *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ."* Can the KKK find common ground with the NAACP through the blood of Jesus Christ? By some miraculous movement of God, might George Bush and Saddam Hussein lay their armies down and commune at the table of

brotherhood? If that sounds radical, then these words were that radical 2000 years ago.

High walls and deep hostility continue today. It continues in the Church. Dismal reality of World Wide Communion Sunday is that the table of our Lord still has restrictions on it in most denominations. The Church continues to be the most segregated eating place in America. Across society, fear has driven us to flock behind gated communities, separate the haves from the have-nots, draw battle lines between conservatives and liberals, judge people by ethnic origin, and condemn people by religious affiliation.

Worst of all, we have slipped into the sad habit of demonizing those different from us. Watch the current political ads. Are candidates really as bad as their opponents would have us believe? Are the lines between winners and losers so clearly known? Is it all them versus us, truth versus lies, good guys versus bad guys? My experience in life has been there are at least three sides to every story: there is your side, my side and the truth, which is somewhere else to be discovered.

Demonizing powerfully stirs the emotions of a partisan crowd but does it bring any healing to a hurting world? It gets sponsors for talk shows, but does it build a world where we will live together in civility? What is this notion of demonizing the person different from me? Paul says in this letter to the Ephesian church, *“Let the wall come down.”*

In Christ, let the walls come down. One of my favorite poems is a piece by Robert Frost called “Mending Wall.” It is the story of two New England farmers who go out each spring to rebuild the rock fences that tumbled down in the freeze and thaw of winter. The rock fences are much like the ones on Old Smyrna Road here in Brentwood. These two farmers have been mending the fences for years under the guise that “good fences make good neighbors.” But one farmer is beginning to question the habit. “My apple trees never get across and eat the cones under his pines,” he reasons as he wears his fingers rough with this outdoor game of adults. Then Frost has the old farmer say this:

Before I build a wall, I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out
And to whom I was like to give offense
Something there is that doesn't love a wall
That wants it down.

On August 13, 1961, almost over night, a 96-mile wall of barbed wire and concrete was built to separate East and West Berlin. The Berlin Wall became a symbol of the cold war era. It not only separated a city, it separated families, a society, a country, a world. But there is *something that doesn't love a wall that wants it down*. And I hold close to me a little piece of concrete that a friend gave to me from that wall. On November 9, 1989 the Berlin wall came tumbling down.

What is this something in human nature that keeps creating gaps in walls where two may walk abreast? Is it anything else than the spirit of the living Christ who is relentlessly working to bring down the walls that separate us from one another? *The Peace of Christ be with you.* Break down the wall.

CHRIST BUILDS A BRIDGE OF LOVE.

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” Love finds a way to span the gap from one side to another. Everybody has a part in it. Every single person has a part in developing this notion of peace.

If we want a better world, we will need a better nation. If we want a better nation, we need to work for a better state. We will have better states when we have better counties. Better counties will come to pass when we have better cities. The reality of better cities depends on better communities. Better communities are the direct result of better families. It takes better individuals to make better families. So if we want better families, we better start being better individuals. If we want a better community, we better become a loving family. To have a better county, we must pay attention to core communities. Better states will come from concerned counties. We will have a better nation when we have better states. The world will be a better place when we become a better nation.

Are you a peace maker? Do you love your neighbor as you love yourself? Does the peace of Christ rule in your heart? *The Peace of Christ be with you.* Build a bridge.

Stand in the gap! The sovereign Lord said to the prophet Ezekiel, *“The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice. I looked for a person to stand in the gap but I found none.”* (Ezekiel 22:30)

Simon and Garfunkel put it this way in “Bridge Over Troubled Water”:
“When you’re weary, feeling small,
When tears are in your eyes, I’ll dry them all.
I’m on your side, when times get rough
And friends just can’t be found.
Like a bridge over troubled waters,
I will lay me down.” That is the meaning of the cross, a bridge over troubled waters.

Bridge people come in all sizes, shapes, colors, ages, stages and classes. One such bridge person was a little 6-year-old girl by the name of Ruby Bridges. Ruby got picked to be the first African-American to integrate her local New Orleans elementary school in the early 1960’s. One day, this little girl walked through a racially jeering crowd dodging the tomatoes thrown in her direction. She walked confidently, step by step, looking straight ahead. She did it because the night

before, lying in bed, her momma had said, “You can do it, Ruby, you can do it for the world. And remember, Jesus faced the mob, too, and he dared to love those who persecuted him. He told us to bless those who persecute.”

The Peace of Christ be with you. Build a bridge that will set a better dream for the world and find a better way for us to live together.

On August 16, 1945, the US dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, Japan, killing 100,000 people instantly and wiping out 70,000 of the cities 76,000 buildings. The co-pilot on that mission, Captain Robert Lewis, wrote in his diary on his way home, “My God, what have we done?” Three days later a second bomb was dropped on the town of Nagasaki.

In 1955, the citizens of Hiroshima built a peace park in the center of their bomb-destroyed city, a memorial to more than 300,000 victims of that single weapon. On that memorial they made this pledge: “Rest in Peace. We promise it will never happen again.” I wonder if we are so resolved. We promise it will never happen again. *May the Peace of Christ be with you.*

Jewish author, Elie Wiesel, tells the parable of a man in a boat. The man is not alone, though he acts as if he were. One night without warning, the man decides to cut a hole under his seat. Other people onboard were naturally alarmed. “What on earth are you doing?” they exclaimed. “You are going to destroy us all.” “Why are you alarmed?” replies the man. “What I am doing is none of your business. I paid my fare. I am not cutting under your seat. Leave me alone.” Wiesel concludes his parable with this comment: “What a fanatic will not accept, but you and I cannot forget, is that we are all in the same boat.”

The peace of Christ be with you. And also with you.

Amen.