

*Ephesians 2:14-19, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56*

*word count: 1,843*

When you visit different churches, you find different interpretations of the message of Christian faith. Some will see it as a message of love for all people, others will see it as a coded map of how to live one's life or perhaps even as a manual where all the answers are in black and white. Still others will find an exclusionary message, where some are saved and some are not. Each community will search their scriptures for passages that back up their beliefs, including our own. Interpreting the New Testament is difficult enough without adding the excess baggage of what we bring to it, but interpret it we must.

One of the difficulties in today's reading is that it purports to be by Paul, and yet most scholars now agree that Paul did not write his letter to the Ephesians. It was considered the highest form of flattery to write "in the hand" of someone else, and it appears that someone looked long and hard at the theology and the writing style of Paul, and copied his hand. Paul was well known here in Ephesus, having gone so far as to rent a hall for two years so that he could get up and speak, which, as you know, he loved to do.

In this simple letter, there are words that strike home. These words give hope that there is a progression in how humanity chooses to treat itself that of necessity is about breaking down the walls that separate us. It is about giving up false privilege so that others can enjoy equal ground.

Depending on your gender, do you remember as a child how you felt when you discovered that the world privileged men over women? Do you remember how unfair it was that the world was made easier for one culture and race over others? We learned about classism and where we fit in as we moved through our socialization in school. Later on, we learned about sexuality—that there is only one way to be, else no matter what position you held in another category, you would lose what status you had arbitrarily been given by accident of birth.

Status. Privilege. Who's In. Who's Out. Our societal and religious systems codified exclusiveness and privilege early on, and in our own tradition, Jesus railed against it. We suffer for this today. What does the face of every president of the United States have in common? Until last January, what was the other common feature?

We are called to knock down walls of hate and hostility and to build bridges of reconciliation, and that calling is emphasized in this powerful passage in the Letter to the Ephesians. "For He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

And:

"So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to God. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

Jesus was a wall-breaker. His message was about breaking down the dividing walls of hostility. This passage from Ephesians is better understood when we see it against the backdrop of the physical make-up of the Temple in the time of Jesus.

Somewhere, (and I cannot remember where it was!) I read that the Temple was a parable in stone; the walls that existed included a few privileged people, but excluded and shut out most. As you moved through the Temple toward the High Altar (the Holy of Holies), there was a series of walls designed to hold people back from God.

The first wall held back foreigners...people of other races and nations. They could go

inside the Temple but only to this first wall.

The second wall held back the women and children. They could only come into the Temple so far... they could not come beyond this second wall.

The third wall held back men of the dominant faith and culture. They could come in further than the foreigners and further than the women, but not as far as the priests.

The fourth wall was a veil which surrounded the Holy of Holies, the High Altar... holding all back from God, except the Priests

The High Priest was the only person who was permitted to go inside the veil, and he went in only once a year on the Day of Atonement. And when he went inside the veil to the High Altar, they tied a rope around his ankle... so, if he fainted or passed out or died while inside the veil, they could pull him back out.

The Holy of Holies..., which represented the presence of God, was remote, fearsome, austere, and unapproachable.

In our faith tradition, we see a Jesus who came to break down the dividing walls and move out to where the people were included. That's a metaphor for what Christian faith is about—God breaking out; smashing down walls and in-breaking into our lives so that we might act on our faith in the world. We forget that, and begin re-building dividing walls.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has just arrived by boat. It says that, "As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."

Just before this passage, King Herod had beheaded Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. That the people were like sheep without a shepherd could be a reference to the loss of a spiritual leader like John, or the tyranny of Herod, who brutalized his own people.

Tyrants then and now use religious rhetoric to put up walls that exclude, belittle and separate, walls that encourage hostility, hatred and bigotry, walls of spiritual terrorism.

It is a tale of pride and prejudice, and it is a tale of vengeance. Isn't that pathetic?

And isn't it human? The writer of Ephesians is telling us of one who proclaimed peace to those who were near as well as those who were far—in other words, peace to all—to every man, woman and child—no one is excluded.

Why do we exclude? Is there anyone here whose own pride is separating you from anybody today? Is that pride a divisive wall of hostility? Are you alienated from anybody today? Do you feel estrange? Is it possible to let it go?

And the worst wall of hostility is prejudice. The word means literally, to "pre-judge," to judge without all the facts—to judge someone without really knowing the other person. It is hurtful, dangerous and destructive. It makes us less than the person we desire ourselves to be.

And last—vengeance. The angry, bitter spirit that will not forgive, that nurses its wrath to keep it warm, that broods and festers and looks for a chance to "get 'em back." What a wall of hostility that is—and some might say that is what the war in Iraq was all about—the desire to lash back at someone—anyone.

There was a sign in a business window that read like this: "To err is human. To forgive is not our policy." Don't we live by that policy to some extent?

What about us here? Has someone hurt you? Do you feel bitterness in your heart toward another person? If so—is it possible to leap past your pride and reach out to mend the situation? Someone once said, "Acid burns most the container it is held in."

The Koran says, "To God belongs the East and West; whichever way you turn, the face of God is there." We bring many names.

As the Koran also says, "Had Allah pleased, He could have made you one nation: but it is His wish to *prove* you by that which He has bestowed upon you. Vie with each other in good works, for to Allah you shall return and He will declare to you what you have disagreed about."

Vie with each other, Christians, Muslims, Jews. Vie with each other, all faiths on earth—vie with each other in good works. In this day and age, it will be disastrous to vie in the building of power structures or for religious supremacy. But vie with each other to live out the loving message that your faith brings you to believe above all other things.

Christians spend too much time trying to be right about the legalistic methods of salvation and not enough time on salvific living. If we ask, “What does salvific living look like?” the answer is in the life of Jesus Christ.

What is the truth that you know as a Christian that is worth staking your life on? The liberating message of Jesus Christ was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and to love your neighbor as yourself. That is the living message that frees us from all legalisms and any walls that separate us from our neighbors of any faith as well as our neighbors of no faith.

If your religion makes you judgmental and narrow, what does that say about how you come to know a God we define by the word love?

If your faith makes you more open and more loving, then what are the fruits of that particular interpretation of faith?

I’ll close with a story some of you may have heard me tell before. This is a story of salvific living. There was a missionary who was sent to India at the end of World War II to preach the gospel. He was given money to return for a Christmas vacation. When he reached the docks where his ship was that would take him home, he found some of the boatloads of Jewish refugees who were at all of the ports of India at this time.

He greeted the Jews by saying, “Merry Christmas.” They responded by telling him that they were without justice, homes, family, or possessions, and to forgive them for not wishing him a Merry Christmas.

The missionary asked them what Christmas present he could get for them, given where they were right now. The consensus among them was that they were hungry—hungry for the warm baked goods that they had missed since even before getting aboard the boat that would take them to safety.

And so the missionary went and spent every penny he had for his passage home on warm pastries for all of the Jewish refugees at the docks.

When he was done, he wired back home to ask for more money. The Missionary Society asked him why—and he told them what he had done.

They said to him, “Why did you do that with mission money—they don’t even *believe* in Christ!”

And he said, “Yes, but I do.”

And so do I.

## Scripture for Sunday, July 19, 2009

### **Ephesians 2:14-19**

14For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

### **Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.