

22 March 2009

Pink Floyd Got It Wrong

(This is the fourth message in our Lenten series 'Together Again: The Meaning of the Atonement.')

Ephesians 2:14-22

Over the more than two years that we've lived here I've noticed some milestones along the way—little things that represent our becoming Londoners. How to negotiate bus routes, how to order coffee, the difference between a roll and a bap (usually about £1)—all of those things that seem a little mysterious in the beginning are becoming second nature. I knew London had become my home when I could walk through our house in the dark without hitting anything. I knew all the twists and turns—the place had become familiar enough that I knew where all the walls were.

It's hard to imagine life without the walls we need. They provide safety, warmth, protection from the elements and from danger. They allow us to build places to live and also to hang pictures of loved ones. They allow for privacy and also for quiet and peace in a noisy world. Walls can be so good to us.

But there are walls that are designed to separate—whether they're physical or symbolic—there are walls that exist to divide people from each other. We've seen some of those walls come down during our lifetimes...but we've also seen some go up. In our own lives we have relationships that are broken or wounded for one reason or another—we have walls that keep us from reconnecting with some of the people in our lives.

The point of this series as we reflect and prepare for Easter is that Christ's sacrifice offers us healing for our relationships with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with the earth.

It's worth reviewing for a moment what those relationships were supposed to look like. The Bible describes it with the word Shalom. We were created to live in a constant, blissful state of perfect Shalom. Shalom appears more than 250 times in the Old Testament—it's clearly important to God that we understand it. Shalom describes a state of perfect completion and wholeness. One writer called it 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'

So let's keep this part set firmly in our minds: We were designed to live healthy, content, happy lives filled with wholeness and peace, all in the presence of God. 'The webbing together of God, humans, and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'

Today we look at how Christ offers healing for our relationships with each other.

14For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus

making peace, 16and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We're back in Ephesians. Paul didn't start this church in what is now Turkey, but he provided them with pastoral care in the form of these letters. The main theme of this letter describes what it means to be united with each other through the ministry of Jesus Christ. This letter says more about the church as a community than any other letter Paul wrote, and it also talks about relationships with each other—what they communicate to the world about the work of God in our lives.

Our text starts boldly—'For Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two one.' He has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. He preached peace to people far and near, and because of his great gift we find ourselves in one great big occasionally happy family.

All of this—every bit of it, according to the text, comes as a result of Christ's great sacrificial act. 'His purpose', Paul says, 'was to create in himself one person out of the two, thus creating peace, and in this one body to reconcile both to God through the Cross.'

There it is. There's the point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He came and loved and served and died and rose for this reason: To bring people together with each other and with God. To tear down the walls that separate us from the Shalom we were made to enjoy.

I said before that there are good, necessary walls in our lives. But those aren't the walls Paul is talking about in our text. 'The Dividing Wall of Hostility' sounds like a made up name. It sounds like one of the place names in Monty Python or the Princess Bride: Remember the 'cliffs of insanity' or the 'fire swamp' or the 'pit of despair'? The 'dividing wall of hostility' sounds like Paul was making a joke, but it was actually a real place.

Jerusalem in the 1st century was occupied by Roman forces. They governed the region, levied taxes and provided public services. But within that structure they allowed Judaism to be practiced and the leaders were permitted to enforce Jewish law as long as it didn't conflict with Roman law. Mostly it was the purity laws that Jews back then were allowed to enforce, and many of those centered around the holiest place in all of Judaism: The Temple.

This was the place where Jews went to offer prayers and sacrifices. It was where the priests lived and worked. It was the heart of Jewish faith and hopes for a different kind of future. It was also a place with a strict set of rules designed to protect its religious purity.

It's in the Temple that we find the Dividing Wall. It was the barrier that limited where Gentiles—non-Jews—could go within the Temple. There was an inscription on the Wall—here's what it said:

"No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."

Well. It doesn't get too much more hostile than that. Don't come near this place, and if you do, it's your own dumb fault when we kill you.

The dividing wall of hostility has become a symbol for anything that separates people or groups. For us it represents the divisions that still exist among people Christ died to bring together.

It's been about 20 years since the Berlin Wall came down. For those of us who remember living during the Cold War that still sounds amazing. There's a piece of the wall at the Imperial War Museum that I take visitors to see. I have pictures of at least a dozen friends and family members standing in front of that chunk of the wall.

It's hard to imagine it now, but in the years right after the Berlin Wall came down, there were moves on both sides to put it back up. People from East and West had gotten so used to being separated from each other—so accustomed to the division between them—that they didn't want to reunite.

The story of the Berlin Wall teaches us something important about these reconciling revolutions: It's one thing to tear down a wall, but until we cross over the line where the wall stood, it's as if it still exists, dividing and separating and disconnecting. Once the wall comes down, we have to cross the rubble and finish the job.

What about divisions among family or friends? What about the places where we're all in need of reconciliation and forgiveness and healing—in need of a few walls to be torn down?

We've heard the saying: 'Strong fences make good neighbors.' It's from a poem by Robert Frost, but using it as a principle for life is actually a corruption of Frost's point. In the poem, 'Mending Wall', Frost helps his neighbor fix the wall that separates them, but he secretly wishes that the wall wasn't necessary—that they could pass freely in and out of each other's property and lives.

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.*

What do we wall in or wall out? What about the places where we need to experience reconciliation with another person?

The message of our passage this morning is that Christ's sacrifice for us extends to the broken relationships in our lives—the ones that need some healing or mending. 'For he himself is our peace...he has destroyed the barrier—the dividing wall of hostility...we are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.' The message of our passage this morning is that Christ came to rebuild Shalom in our relationships—the kind of Shalom that was meant to be there in the first place. But usually that means we have to cross over the line where the wall used to be.

The Cross of Jesus Christ offers reconciliation for the relationships we have that are broken somehow, but that's just part of the story. The walls have been destroyed, but we have to cross over where they were, if we're ever going to experience the full measure of Christ's gift to us.

This is where Pink Floyd got it wrong. Pink Floyd is a rock band, for those of you who aren't recognizing the name. Those of us of a certain age will remember a year or so when you couldn't get away from Pink Floyd's double-album called 'The Wall.' There was a major live show with a huge wall on the band's tour, and it was even made into a movie with a young Bob Geldof playing the lead. In my quest to introduce Ian to the classics, I played the entire album during dinner one night last week.

In 'The Wall,' the central character loses his father to war, has an overbearing mother, is abused by teachers at school, and is abandoned by his wife. He responds to these painful relationships by building a wall around himself—to separate himself from those who hurt or threatened him somehow. Each relationship is 'just another brick in the wall.'

The good news for us as we reflect on Christ's ministry and prepare for Easter—the good news for us is that the wall—the dividing wall of hostility—has been destroyed. There is a remedy on offer for the impact of sin on our relationships with each other. That remedy is the Shalom that God created for us—the Shalom we can have now through the work of Christ on the Cross.

The real question for us is this:

Will we accept the offer?

Will we step over the lines where the wall used to be and accept the gift of reconciliation on the other side?

This year, are we willing to go beyond just celebrating Easter? This year, are we brave enough not just to celebrate but also to experience what Easter really offers?

In our first reading today we heard that if we're one with Christ, then we're a new creation and we're given a ministry of reconciliation as Christ's ambassadors. That's good news for all of our relationships—it's not easy, but it's healing and it's good.

On the section of the Berlin Wall at the Imperial War Museum, there's some graffiti on it

that says this: 'Change Your Life.' I've always loved the way that looks—what it means, especially on a piece of that wall.

The invitation this season is to change your life. The call to all of us is to accept this gift of reconciliation—to change our lives in a way that allows us to live in Shalom with each other. There's still a long way to go, but the Easter miracle is coming, and it changes everything.

Amen.