

Getting Right with our communities

1 Cor 1:10-17 + Ephesians 2:11-22

Over the last weeks we have considered Getting right with God; Getting right with others; last week 'Getting right with our families and now we are considering getting right with our communities.

My focus this morning is this: Jesus has brought peace; destroying the walls between peoples and making his people ONE in him.

And as a church we need to encourage one another with the message of reconciliation in Jesus. This is 2 fold: vertically (with God) and horizontally (with fellow mankind).

So I wonder what you think of when we talk about 'community'.

Definitions:

A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common

A group of people living together

A particular area or place considered together with its inhabitants

Therefore we belong to several different communities don't we?

Where we live, where we work; where we worship

But what is interesting is that within all these different communities there seems that there are sometimes divisions- sometimes conflicts which I am going to call 'walls'. Walls can be good in that they can protect and make safe but sometimes they can cause division.

What walls can you think of and picture and why were they built?

- Berlin Wall- 1961 to separate 3 zones controlled by France, GB and America – down in 1989
- Great wall of china – 771 BC to protect Qin dynasty
- Hadrian's wall – begun in 122AD – extent of Roman rule
- The wall dividing Palestine and Israel

I was truly shocked when I went to Jerusalem and encountered firsthand the 'Wall'. The wall dividing Israel and Palestine was started in 2000 and upon completion; its total length will be about 700 kilometres. The barrier contains an on-average 60-metre (200 ft) wide exclusion area. The width of some sections (about 6% of the barrier) is 3 metres (9.8 ft) where the barrier is constructed as a concrete wall up to 8 metres (26 ft) high

In a 2005 report, the United Nations stated that:

... It is difficult to overstate the humanitarian impact of the Barrier. The route inside the West Bank severs communities, people's access to services, livelihoods and religious and cultural amenities. In addition, plans for the Barrier's exact route and crossing points through it are often not fully revealed until days before construction commences. This has led to considerable anxiety amongst Palestinians about how their future lives will be impacted

I am sure that we would like to see all walls come down – wouldn't we? But what about the invisible walls that exist in our own lives and in our own communities? Surely we would like to get rid of them too – I am quite sure God wants us to as well.

Robert Frost wrote a famous poem, "Mending Wall." It's a wonderful poem full of

humour and (I think) a sense of sadness. It's about two neighbours who go through the same ritual each spring, meeting at the wall to repair it– to refill the gaps that fallen stones have left and repair the damage done by hunters whose pursuit of their game has left the wall in disrepair. The neighbours have apparently done this for many years, yet it strikes the narrator in the poem to question just why it is they have the wall in the first place.

"And on a day we meet to walk the line
and set the wall between us once again
We keep the wall between us as we go.

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
 And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
 we have to use a spell to make them balance:
 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'

We wear our fingers tough with handling them.
 Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
 One on a side. It comes to little more:
 There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
 Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
 If I could put a notion in his head:
 "Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it where there are cows?
 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.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall...

They don't have cows anymore that might stray onto the other's property! Just trees. So why is the wall there? Hasn't the time come that its purpose no longer exists? Yet, it remains . . . why? Because it's always been there!

The truth is: its human nature to construct walls isn't it?
 In our neighbourhoods, we build our houses and then hold up inside of them rarely venturing out to get to know our neighbours. . . . I mean really get to know them. In society in general, we construct walls. These are physical walls but they can be invisible walls too.

There are the walls still divides black and white.

There are walls which divide gender- men and women;

There are walls of social status- the divide of affluent and the poor.

Walls are all around us! And for many- perhaps they help us feel comfortable, protected, unchallenged. I'm convinced that's how it was for 1st century Gentiles– to whom Paul is writing his letter of Ephesians to! We see in this text that was just read which concerns the divide between Jew & Gentile!

Eph 2:11-12

11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. (NIV)

Paul starts out this passage by saying, "Remember the WALL!"

Remember Paul is talking to Gentiles, here. . . (like us) "Uncircumcised" was a typical & disrespectful term used by the Jews ("The Chosen") to describe the Gentiles. They were heathens . . . clearly NOT the people of God! It would be hard to adequately describe for you in today's terms the disdain that Jews had for Gentiles (& vice versa- no doubt). As wide as the divide has been between whites & blacks in America– I don't think that quite does it justice. As bitter the divide right now between some fundamentalist Moslems and Christians – that's not the same thing either! The divide was racial- but extended far beyond race. It was political- but extended far beyond politics. It was religious- but extended far beyond religion. Other ancient Jewish writings refer to Gentiles as "fuel for the fires of hell."

In the temple in the 1st century there was a literal dividing wall which separated the important part of the temple, the Court of the Israelites, with the Court of the Gentiles. Signs were posted in Latin and Greek warning Gentiles not to go any farther into the temple precincts under penalty of death! Archaeological and other evidence has found such signs! This was a serious divide! Imagine how difficult it must have been for either group to extend the other the right hand of fellowship!

But remember, Paul is talking to Gentile CHRISTIANS! They were Gentiles 'by birth' but they were now Christians and now a part of the church at Ephesus. Paul tells them to remember when they were separated from God! Remember

when that wall had separated them from God!

Separation from Christ/ God is the very definition of spiritual death! They were excluded from citizenship among God's chosen people.

They were without HOPE because they were without God! Why does Paul want them to remember?

Because one needs to remember 'how bad it was before Christ' before one can appreciate 'how sweet it is in Christ.' There was this bitter wall which had separated them (not just from the Jews) but from God!

And then we read that Christ has restored the ideal by destroying the wall and bringing Jew & Gentile together! Notice, the two are made one in Him! "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace." The Gentiles who had been so far away from God- separated by so much- have been brought near! Israel, too, who had been awaiting this coming Messiah, but had failed him miserably in their keeping of the law, were reconciled through the blood of Jesus.

And this is the message for us today:

For through Christ we have access to the Father by one Spirit. With the barriers gone, we ALL (Jew, Gentile, male, female, black, white, etc.) have full access to Father . . . because we share the one Spirit.

I know I haven't been here very long but it has become clear that there seems to be a wall between Dadford and Stowe – deep rooted historical hurts that have gone back many many years – maybe even to the time that Stowe village was moved to Dadford! First there is a physical separation – distance and the fact it's not easy to find the church through the very imposing school and lack of signs. But there are other invisible walls – that are built up when people feel that they not heard or feel rejected – especially by the church. They talk to friends and neighbours about their hurts and then these people often built up their walls too.

I believe that as a church we can do much to take down the wall and in fact we really must reach out to Dadford because Jesus wants us to be one. And it's all about relationships. There is already great work in this area: the events such as the Big Breakfast; the Coffee mornings' the Father's Day Picnic; the Harvest Supper and now the relaunch of the Parish Magazine now to be called 'Dadford and Stowe Parish Magazine – which will include more Dadford Village articles and advertisements. We are considering launching Messy Church in Dadford Village Hall – taking church to Dadford.

In October there will be a Parish Away Day and I pray that you will come and share what we can do to break down walls and reach out to others.

I hope and pray that you want to be a part of the vision that would long for our communities to be knit together as Paul longed for the Corinthian community to be - 'You should all be in agreement and that there should be no divisions between you. Instead you should be fully equipped with the same mind and the same opinion'. And for the Ephesians Paul advised 'though Jesus 'two became one'-one human being out of two, so making peace'.

This text is a call for the church to be the CHURCH!

. . . to be family! . . . to be a place of reconciliation!

. . . to be a place where the walls are let down and open & honest, real relationships are formed!

. . . to be a place where Jesus is central & at the heart & core of everything we do!

This is where I want to be; this is where I want to do all I can to break down any walls; to build relationships and show others that through Jesus anything is possible. I hope that's what you want too.