



Brick and Mortar

TEXT
Psalm 103:6–14
Ephesians 2:11–22

September 2, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

This summer I went, for the first time, to a family reunion that wasn't mine. That makes it sound like I crashed a reunion somewhere, but that's not exactly it.

My wife's family gets together every other year. The last time they had the reunion, I was on a trip with our high school students, and the time before that Meredith and I weren't married and yadda yadda. So, this was the first time I have ever been to a family reunion where I didn't belong there by blood, but as a result of association.

I don't know how many of you have been to the family reunion of a spouse, but it's a pretty interesting event. You know, sociologically speaking, meeting in-laws is like *oooooh* and meeting extended in-law family is like *OOOOOOHHH!*

It's an interesting window into some larger family dynamics as well as a good lesson in feeling out of place. Here are all these people, and you know very little about them; you've haven't even met most of them.

We are there with Silas, who is one year old, so when I interacted with people, it was mostly about him — how he's doing, and how things are with

him, and what's been hard and what has been great and so on. And I'm happy to talk about that stuff because, you know, it's a conversation to connect with these people.

But Meredith has an entire history with them: stories from growing up and childhood and oral histories about what's going on with them — a shared memory of who they are to each other that is more than name.

So we spend a weekend like that, and here comes Sunday morning when her family puts together a worship service. Her dad, Jim, is a Baptist pastor, so he was in charge this year and something happened that changed how I saw that weekend.

At the service, Jim preached about what it means to be family — that not all family is by genes, and there is a sense in which family is in and through relationship. He noted that there were people in the room who were in fact not related by blood. I was, of course, not the only spouse who was crashing this family reunion. And I realized that all those other spouses had their first family reunion, too. And what I was seeing now, what looked so much like them being a part of the larger family,

it was the result of a lot of family reunions.

Sometimes feeling like family isn't instantaneous, but is instead a process. It's like a wall that gets taken down one brick at a time, revealing who we are meant to be to each other.

When we read today's verses to the church in Ephesus, one of Paul's greatest concerns is that they are a people who can't see past their differences — particularly differences in history and what it means — what it takes — to belong to each other. On the one hand, Gentiles saw the Jewish people as weird, having strange and oddball observances, and monotheistic at a time when that was incredibly countercultural. The Jewish culture, on the other hand, touted its adherence to Torah as a badge of honor over other cultures. To see each other as valued and equal was, to say the least, difficult for everyone.¹

So Paul's point is, in reality, incredibly radical. What Paul is trying to do is reconcile two groups of people who didn't see eye to eye on much of anything — by pointing to the person and work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. Because of what Christ has done, everyone, including the "non-privileged," have come

to share with Israel in the covenant of fellowship with God.²

Paul's concern is about the Church's essential unity in spite of barriers of race and culture. In fact, Paul even suggests that the Church replaces national/ethnic groups.³ Cultures and classes that had been separated by walls of prejudice and tradition are now opened to one another, and lines of connection and conversation are established. In and through the person of Christ there is a twofold reconciliation — with God and with each other.⁴

To illustrate that new reality, Paul speaks of the dividing wall being broken down. This might be merely a metaphor, but it had another, more literal, reference at the time: the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was made up of a series of courts, each a little higher in stature than the one before it. The outermost court was the Court of Gentiles, then the Court of Women, then the Court of the Israelites, then the Court of the Priests and, finally, that Holy Place itself.

And between each court there was a wall — a kind of screen of marble. Each wall had tablets fixed to it, warning those who did not belong not to pass. In fact, one such tablet was discovered in 1871. It reads: "Let no one under any other nation come within the fence and barrier around the Holy Place. Whosoever will be taken doing so will himself be responsible for the fact that his death will ensue."⁵

Yeah, that's a pretty serious wall. In fact, scholars suspect

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem for bringing an Ephesian Gentile into the Temple beyond the appropriate barrier.

At the time Paul was writing, there were barriers everywhere, and is today much different? Barriers can be all too prevalent in our lives.

Besides the family reunion this summer, Meredith signed Silas up for swim lessons. I didn't realize swim lessons existed for kids that are less than a year old, but they do. Meredith scheduled his lessons for Monday mornings, and because she is a teacher, and the lessons continued through August, it meant that in August it was my turn to go to swim lessons. There's a bit of a learning curve when the other parents and kids in the class have gone through these activities each week and I'm there for the first time. I'm still trying to figure out what, exactly, Silas is even capable of in the water when the teacher announces that we will now rotate through the activity stations.

So I go to the closest one, which basically involves taking rings off of a cone. No problem. Silas is pretty good at that.

The next station involves a mirror up on a ledge. Lots of kids enjoy seeing themselves in the mirror, so it is incentive to pull up on the ledge of the pool. No problem. Silas is pretty good at that, too.

We rotate again and I head for this play structure that is half-submerged in the water. But the instructor stops me. "Oh, don't skip this station," she says. I don't really see anything

to indicate there even IS a station, and she must have seen the confusion on my face. "Just sit Silas up on the edge of the pool, then say his name, and pull him into the water and hold him underwater while I count." In my head I think, "Yeah. OK. Hold my baby ... under the water. Is this a test to see if I'm a bad parent?" But what I say is, "What are you counting to?"

"Oh, well I believe Silas is up to four seconds."

Now, I think I can manage a pretty good poker face when I need to. And I think I did OK. But in my head — shocker — explosions were going off. Four seconds! This kid is barely 12 months old! He can't hold his breath like that. How would he even know HOW to hold his breath at ALL, let alone for four seconds! This is crazy. This whole thing is crazy! Does my wife know they do this at swim lessons?

And while I'm thinking that, I call Silas's name, and I pull him off the ledge, and I hold him underwater. One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three, one thousand, four, one thousand!

GASP! He's breathing. He looks a little ... betrayed at what just happened, but he's breathing. And then we rotate. Just like that, on to the next thing.

We end up going under two more times before the lesson is over. Four seconds each time. GASP! Breathe. GASP! Breathe. It was scary every time. And it was amazing.

You see, the thing is, when God broke down the dividing wall in the Temple, it not only

abolished all that separated us from each other, it also took away that which separates us from God. There we are, sitting up there on the ledge to the pool, and God is calling our name to jump in. It feels safe up on the ledge. And we can be so uncertain of what we are really capable of if we dare to jump off of it. Have you ever heard yourself thinking or saying, “God, I can’t POSSIBLY ...” and then you fill in the blank? Whatever it is God might be calling you to, the knee jerk reaction is probably not too different than the one I had with Silas: It can’t possibly be done!

But it can. You see, Silas didn’t start at four seconds. There was a lot behind that moment I didn’t see. Meredith took him to those swim lessons for several weeks, and she saw all the incremental steps it took to get him to that four seconds. She knew he didn’t even go underwater in the first lesson. He made progress second by second, not immediately.

In fact, Silas just had his last swim lesson last week, and he held his breath underwater for eight seconds. Eight seconds! That kind of time wins a rodeo — if I can just figure out how to get him onto a bull.

Imagine if we had tried eight seconds on his first day in the water! This would be a totally different story.

Building family bonds doesn’t happen immediately. Taking big leaps doesn’t happen without first making small jumps. And sitting up on that

ledge is to act like there is a wall preventing us from jumping in and swimming.

So what does that wall look like between you and God — or the walls between you and other people in your life? I’m not sure what walls you have standing between you and God. But I do know that whatever is there, God didn’t put it there. God tears walls down, and it is often us clinging to the bricks and mortar.

Author Rita Snowden tells the story of French soldiers with their sergeant who brought the body of a dead comrade to a cemetery in France to have him buried. The priest told them gently that he was bound by duty to ask if their comrade had been baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. The soldiers replied that they did not know. The priest, in reply, said he was very sorry but in that case he could not permit the burial in his churchyard. So the soldiers took the comrade sadly and buried him just outside the fence.

The next day, they came back to see if the grave was all right, and to their astonishment, they could not find it. As they were about to leave in bewilderment, the priest came up to them. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow them to honor their comrade in the churchyard; so, early in the morning he had risen from bed and with his own hands had moved the fence to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

That, friends, is what love can do. Rules and regulations put up walls to prevent seeing another’s humanity, but love moves them. Love tears them down.⁶

So, what brick might God be calling you to remove next? What would it take on your part to take down one more brick from your wall so you might more clearly love those on the other side?

Maybe it means spending a little more time with your church family. Maybe when you come here you feel out of place, and perhaps it needs more time.

Or maybe you are sensitive to those for whom this community doesn’t feel like family. You want to tear down those walls for other people, with God’s invitation and welcome.

Or maybe you have some barrier between you and God. Maybe there was that one thing a long time ago, or not so long ago, when God disappointed you, so you put up a wall. And now it might be time to say to God that your desire is for that wall to be gone.

Or maybe your wall is with another person. It could be someone, or a group of people, you have a hard time with, and God might be calling you to see them as your brothers and your sisters — to see their humanity and to work on what it means to love him, or her, or them.

Or maybe you built a wall for yourself — to protect or

barricade. Maybe you feel that God couldn't possibly love you. And that is the biggest lie we keep telling. The Psalm we heard assures us that as far as east is from west, that's how far God removes our transgressions from us — a fancy word for things we've done wrong. That is how utterly and completely God has removed the wall that stands between God and you, and me, and anyone else for that matter.

And that's about as good as good news gets. We belong to God and the wall is torn down, and nothing can keep God's love from us, and we are family with each other. We just have to see it.

¹Martin, Ralph P. *Interpretation Series: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians*, pg. 30.

²*Ibid.*, 33.

³*Ibid.*, 31.

⁴*Ibid.*, 34.

⁵Barclay, William. *Daily Bible Study Series: Galatians & Ephesians*, pg. 112.

⁶*Ibid.*, 117.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.