

“Tear Down the Wall”

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

One of the most memorable concerts we’ve attended in the past few years is Roger Waters’ performance of *The Wall*, which he recorded as a member of Pink Floyd. *The Wall* is a semi-autobiographical story of a young man’s increasing alienation from family and society, symbolized by a physical wall that is built on the stage in the course of the first act. As Waters sings the final notes of “Goodbye, Cruel World,” the final brick is placed into the wall, which now completely separates the musicians from the audience. When the second act begins, the band is playing behind the wall, which I found to be a most uncomfortable experience; after all, we attend concerts not only to listen to the music but to watch the performers – which was made impossible because of the wall. While animation and other activities were performed around and above the wall, its presence felt very unnatural; I found myself thinking of the opening words of Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall*: “*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.*” In the performance’s dramatic conclusion, I found myself singing along with those who were crying out “tear down the wall!” as the barrier was finally destroyed and left in rubble. It was a great concert, as well as a powerful statement of the unnatural separations that walls often create.

Some walls are necessary: retaining walls hold the ground in place, while sea walls prevent waves from eroding the shoreline. Prisons walls keep dangerous criminals away from those to whom they could harm, while farm walls keep livestock within the bounds of the property. But other walls are unnatural, dividing property and persons where such divisions need not occur. Walls don’t even need to be physical barriers to create divisions; walls of hatred, mistrust, prejudice, and exclusion can be far more divisive than even the strongest and highest barriers. While some might argue, as does the protagonist in Frost’s poem, that “*good fences make good neighbours,*” the divisions created by such walls often serve to destroy far more than they do to protect. “*Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.*”

In his commission to his apostles in the moments before his Ascension, our Lord Jesus Christ proclaims to them that “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8). When the gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon them on the day of Pentecost, the first barrier that separates people is removed; once “*all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*” (2:4). The result is that the “*devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem*” during this festival, who had been prevented by language barriers from hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, now rejoice that “*in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power*” (2:11), and on that day thousands join the apostles in becoming followers of Jesus Christ. The walls and barriers continue to come down in the acts of these apostles as they continue the ministry of Jesus in healing those whose physical barriers prevented them from living the abundant life that God always desired for them, and would continue to break down all human means of separating people from one another, so that “*in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*” (10:35). The apostles’ barrier-breaking ministry was the continuation of the work of Christ is tearing down dividing walls in order to reunite that which never should have been separated in the first place:

- “For 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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” – Ephesians 2:14-16.

In our first lesson, we meet a man whose entire life has been defined by walls that have prevented him from having full access to blessings that other people took for granted. Luke describes him as *“an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury.”* (8:27). A Jewish community has existed in Ethiopia for thousands of years (many Ethiopians have relocated in recent years to Israel), and this Jew of the Diaspora would have joined his fellow Jews journeying to Jerusalem as spiritual pilgrims from a distant land, traveling to the Holy City in a quest to better understand the Hebrew Scriptures’ prophecies of God’s salvation. But his physical condition would have prevented him from achieving all that he desired from this pilgrimage; as a eunuch, he was on the margins of mainstream Israel, excluded by law from full participation in the covenant community:

- “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.” – Deuteronomy 23:1.
- “For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.” – Leviticus 21:18-20.

No matter how devout a Jew he was or how earnestly he desired to gain access to the holy places, his physical condition would have resulted in his being excluded. *“This pious proselyte, who seeks to know God’s purposes more fully, has been excluded from the very religious community whose resources would illumine his quest.”* (Robert W. Wall).

When we meet the Ethiopian, he is returning home from what was probably a disappointing visit to Jerusalem: *“he had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.”* (8:29-30). As will become clear, he is having difficulty understanding the meaning of this particular passage. If he has been permitted to speak to one of the teachers in Jerusalem, perhaps he would have gained a better sense of what the prophet is proclaimed; but having been barred from their presence, he has been abandoned to the darkness of ignorance and uncertainty, yet another barrier that prevents him from receiving the fullness of God’s grace that is made alive to us through God’s holy Word. But that dividing wall will soon be breached when the apostle Philip obeys the command of the angel of the Lord to *“get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza”* (8:26). Even though he has no way of knowing what this means, Philip responds with trust and obedience, one of the true marks of a disciple of Christ. Because he obediently travels this road, he comes into the presence of the Ethiopian who is in the midst of the confusion that all of the walls imposed on him have created; the Spirit then instructs him to *“go over to this chariot and join it.”* (8:29). Approaching the chariot, Philip hears the Ethiopian *“reading the prophet Isaiah,”* specifically from one of the prophets Servant Songs that speaks of one who will suffer for the sake of God’s people:

- “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life was taken away from the earth.” – 8:32-33 (Isaiah 53:7-8).

Sensing that the Ethiopian is having difficulty understanding these words, Philip asks him, *“Do you understand what you are reading?”* to which the Ethiopian replies, *“How can I, unless someone guides me?”* (8:30). He then invites Philip to join him in his chariot; and unlike so many others who would have refused, who would have allowed the walls that separated this man from the rest of society to separate them as well, Philip joins him. At last, the Ethiopian is able to gain a fuller understanding of the meaning of God’s Word; finally, he is able to ask the question that walls had preventing him from uttering: *“About whom, may I ask you, does this prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”* (8:34). This gives Philip an opportunity to witness to the Gospel; *“starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus”* (8:35), that Christ is the fulfillment of the prophetic word of the one who would suffer on behalf of all God’s people, so that all that had divided people from God and from one another might be destroyed, so that the unity that God intended at creation might be reestablished. For the

Ethiopian, this includes another promise of God spoken by the same prophet he is now reading in the presence of one who can help him understand and receive this word of life and salvation:

- “Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, ‘The LORD will surely separate me from his people’; and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree.’ For thus says the LORD: to the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” – Isaiah 56:3-5.

The good news that Christ has broken down all dividing walls is now good news for this Ethiopian, the message that the barriers that have separated him from other members of his community and denied him full access to the blessings intended for God’s people will no longer define his life. So when he and Philip come to some water, he asks the apostle *“look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”* Proclamation has now led to conversion, and there is indeed nothing that prevents him from receiving the blessings of Holy Baptism, which include *“forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.”* (*Small Catechism*). When the both of them, *“Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him”* (8:39), they each go their separate ways, both engaging in Christian mission. The Ethiopian *“went on his way rejoicing,”* knowing that from now on that *“neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39). Philip finds himself at Azotus; *“and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.”* (8:40).

While there may be circumstances in which people need to be kept separate from others (such as when a quarantine is necessary), once those conditions have ended the divisions that they necessitated need to end as well. The laws that excluded persons like the Ethiopian from the faith community and equal access to God’s blessings may have once had a purpose in Israel’s life, especially at a time when they were reestablished themselves as a free people returning to the land of promise. But as God desires to *“feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep* (Isaiah 40:11), so is it God’s desire that *“all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.”* (Psalm 22:27). These words are from the psalm that Jesus speaks from the Cross, words that express his feelings of despair and abandonment (*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* – 22:1), but which foreshadow the tearing of the Temple curtain at the moment of his death which symbolizes all of the divisions that no longer exist because of the work of Christ in reunited us with God and with others through his death and resurrection:

- “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and any bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” – Matthew 27:51-52.

Traditional boundaries and borders are obliterated, for God’s people will include the whole world, fulfilling the Lord’s call to Abraham that through his descendants *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Genesis 12:3).

As we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism this morning, the Ethiopian’s question to Philip challenges us to consider *“what is to prevent me from being baptized?”* We understand Holy Baptism as a gift of God, a blessing which *“brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it as the words and promises of God declare.”* (*Small Catechism*). We bestow this blessing upon all people, including infants, *“who through such baptism are entrusted to God and become pleasing to him.”* (*Augsburg Confession*). We gather at the Lord’s Table to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, which were given and shed *“for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.”* As Lutheran Christians who are *“in Mission for Others,”* we believe that *“our mission is to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with people in Canada and around the world through the*

proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the Sacraments, and through service in Christ's name." (ELCIC Theology of Mission). As our Lord has entrusted to his Church the task of proclaiming the good news, we must be faithful in ensuring that we place no restrictions, build no walls, and erect no barriers that would prevent anyone from having full access to the blessings of God's grace:

- "I cannot moderate my definition of grace, because the Bible forces me to make it as sweeping as possible. God is 'the God of all grace,' in the apostle Peter's words. And grace means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less. It means that I, even I who deserve the opposite, am invited to take my place at the table in God's family." – Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

The gifts of God are blessings for all the people of God; and no walls, no barriers, and no restrictions must be placed that would deny anyone access to these God's gracious love. Yet far too often the Church has been guilty of doing precisely this: putting up walls of traditions and regulations that bar people from receiving God's gifts; deny people access to the blessings of our Lord because of how they speak, or where they are from, or how they appear, or who they love. Even the language that we use has been a means of keeping others at an arm's distance, so that they cannot take their rightful place in the presence of the Lord. The God who does not love any walls calls us to tear down the walls that have separated us from one another and have kept too many people away from the life-changing message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

- "The object of God's love, according to biblical faith, is not first of all the church; it is the world: 'God so loved the *cosmos* ... The end – the goal that this faith envisages – is the 'salvation' of the world; God wants to make the world whole, to fulfill its promise, to 'mend' its torn and tattered life ... [this] mission of the church is of central importance to Christian faith, so much so that it constitutes the most basic reason why the church must exist." – Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?*

At the end of *The Wall*, I found myself cheering along with the rest of the crowd at the Nassau Coliseum because that unnatural barrier had finally been torn down. Walls have no place on a concert stage, as their existence cannot be justified in many locations – especially in the Church which was called together by the Lord whose death and resurrection is meant to tear down all that would divide us from God and separate us from one another. We worship a Lord who "*doesn't love a wall, [who] wants it down*" – and our mission is to also "tear down the wall" so that nothing will separate us from the love of God which is ours in the one who tears down all walls – our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.