

Sermon for Sunday, July 22, 2018 - "God's Building Project"

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 22, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

It must be all the work we're doing around here - I seem to have construction on the brain. Last week's sermon was all about plumb lines - God's word should be our plumb line, says the prophet Amos. This week, a phrase from our Ephesians reading has captured my attention: Jesus "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." I keep picturing Jesus as God's singular wrecking crew, smashing through all the hostile barriers we put up.

That's not how we usually imagine Jesus. We talk about Jesus the Good Shepherd, the light of the world, the bread of life, but Jesus with a sledgehammer? Not so much. Jesus as God's wrecking crew isn't a warm, fuzzy image, but it's one we really need.

Our world is full of walls, fences, gates, partitions, all manner of barriers aimed at keeping something or someone in and something or someone else out.

We do need some walls. Walls in our homes protect us from the elements; fences keep livestock safely in and predators out; partitions inside buildings allow for privacy and increased functionality.

Yet walls, both literal and spiritual, can also increase the hostility in our world. All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God.

God's purposes, according to Ephesians, are to create one new humanity thus making peace, and to build us together into a dwelling place for God.

That all feels like an awfully ambitious building project, especially these days. It makes the work we're doing around here seem much more manageable. Yet, God who raised Jesus from the dead can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. God is at work to build a new heaven and new earth and a new humanity without divisions. In order for this construction project to happen, however, Jesus has to do some demolition work within each of us because we all help to build up hostility in our world. We're all master builders when it comes to putting up walls between us and others.

It's so easy to judge the walls others build - in Israel, on the southern border, in Berlin, between Jews and Gentiles in ancient times. Yet, when we do some honest digging within, it's apparent that we build walls, too - on a smaller scale, but the results are just as divisive. We draw sharp lines between us and them - black/white, Liberal/conservative, gay/straight, and on and on and on. We pile on the raw materials of fear and hatred and there's no shortage of those very raw materials within us. We cement it all together with our stereotypes and prejudices and fortify it with our pride. The walls grow taller and thicker. Our

sin cuts us off from one another and from God. God has commanded us to love and it grieves God when we do not.

But Jesus is at work to break the power of sin within us, to free us from the tall prisons caused by our sinfulness and hostility. On the cross, Jesus proved that nothing - not sin, not evil, not violence, not hatred, not even death - *nothing* can separate us from the love of God. Jesus tore down the curtain, the barrier, that would keep us away from God.

We now have a place in God's household - a very large house with space for all tribes and nations, a dwelling place with many rooms, but no walls of hostility. We now have a place as citizens of God's kingdom, a kingdom with wide-open borders. We are no longer aliens or strangers but citizens with the saints. We have a place to belong, a place to call home.

Most of the time, when we belong somewhere we are the insiders and others, outsiders. We belong to a family or nation and others don't; we are part of the tribe and others aren't.

Yet God is creating one new humanity with no distinctions between people. To accomplish this, Jesus not only tears down walls. He also preached peace to those far off and those near and draws us all into God.

As Jesus brings us together with people that we'd prefer to keep at a distance, he also keeps chipping away at our walls. When we're in proximity with other people; when we know their names, their stories, their hopes and dreams; it is so much harder to hate them. The walls of hostility begin to crumble.

Lawyer, author and civil rights leader Bryan Stevenson talks often about the lessons he's learned by being in close contact with people in prison. He says, in his book *Just Mercy*, "Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

We need to be in proximity to those we fear, those we hate. This is so hard to do, but we aren't on our own as we do it. Jesus is our peace and he is with us; we can follow where he leads into uncomfortable and even risky situations.

In God's kingdom, we have the assurance of a home, a place to belong; but this assurance is not for our comfort. It's so we'll stop worrying about whether we belong and start working to make sure everyone knows that they belong to God. It's so we'll stop feeling the need to build walls of hostility and, instead, join in God's work of building a whole new humanity.

In Christ, we have been given the tools we need to join this work. We've been given Jesus, who is both God's wrecking crew and God's peace. We've been given forgiveness, reconciliation and access to God. We've been drawn near to those we fear, as Jesus shows us that we are held together in the very heart of God.

We have all that we need.

Let's take a moment for prayer.

