

Sermon for Sunday, July 18, 2021 - "Jesus With a Sledgehammer"

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

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

This week during Vacation Bible School, one of the kids noticed the beautiful wooden cross in the Fellowship Hall. So, we went to take a closer look at it together. We talked about all the images of Jesus shown on that cross: Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the resurrection, the bread of life. I noticed one image that wasn't there - Jesus with a sledgehammer, breaking down walls. Of course, that isn't a popular image for Jesus, but it is one that's captured my attention this week as I prayed with our reading from Ephesians. We're told Jesus "has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us." I keep picturing Jesus as God's wrecking crew, smashing through all the hostile barriers we put up.

Jesus with a sledgehammer 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. Of course, we do need some walls for protection, safety, privacy, for large buildings to function well. Yet walls, both literal and spiritual, can also increase 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 feels like an awfully ambitious building project, especially these days. 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, a new earth, and a new humanity.

But in order for this construction project to happen, Jesus has to do some demolition work within each of us because we all help to build up hostility in our world. We are all master builders when it comes to putting up walls between ourselves and others. It's so easy to judge other wall builders: in Israel, on the southern border, between Jews and Gentiles in ancient times. Yet when we do honest digging within, we see that we engage in the same kind of stuff. It may be on a smaller scale, but the results are just as divisive.

We draw sharp lines between us and them, black and white, liberal and conservative, gay and 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, for God has commanded us to love and it grieves God when we do not. But Jesus works to break the power of sin within us and free us from the tall prisons we create. On the cross, Jesus proved that 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. This is a very large house that has space for all tribes and nations. It is a dwelling place that has 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 while others are outsiders. We belong to a family, nation or congregation 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. Jesus also preaches peace to those far off and those near in order to draw us all into God.

As Jesus brings us together with people that we would prefer to keep at a distance, he keeps chipping away at our walls. When we are 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.

This is what can and does happen in congregations. Congregations are one of the few places that conservatives and progressives and people from all generations gather together. Here at Good Shepherd there is an assumption that everyone is liberal. That is not true. And we are all so much more than our beliefs and political views. We get to experience God's large household as we talk and listen to one another. And since ELCA congregations also tend to be very homogenous places when it comes to race, income, sexuality, and gender identity, it's also important for each of us to go outside our congregations and our comfort zones to be in conversation with people who are very different from us.

We need to be in proximity to those we fear, those we hate. This is so hard to do on our own, 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 conversations and relationships. In God's kingdom we have the assurance of a home, a place to belong, but this assurance is not for our comfort. It is so we can stop worrying about whether we belong and start working to make sure everyone knows that they belong to God. It is so we will stop feeling the need to build walls to protect ourselves, 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 that work.

We have been given Jesus who is both God's wrecking crew and God's peace.

We have been given forgiveness, reconciliation and access to God.

We have been drawn near to those we fear, as Jesus shows us that we are held together in the heart of God.

We have all that we need.

Let's take a moment for prayer.