Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Epiphany 3C
Peace, Seattle
January 24, 2010 epk
Nehemiah 8, 1 Cor. 12, Luke 4

WALL & BOUNDARIES

Prayer: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Walls. The world's full of them. Dividing nation from nation, Christian from non-Christian, Israeli from Palestinian, Muslim from Jew. Liberal from conservative. Black from white. American born from foreign born. Have's from have nots. Prisoner from free, and on and on and on.

Now some boundaries we need. Our community has spent the better part of this last year fashioning a Personal Safety Policy that seeks to honor relationships and protect the vulnerable by establishing firm expectations and boundaries around behavior. The world has shown us that such policies are essential in protecting children and vulnerable adults.

Parents who fail to establish firm boundaries at home will not provide the safe container their children need in order to discover who they are; often through the testing of those boundaries.

God's gift to God's people while they were being formed in the Wilderness School was 10 commands that set boundaries and expectations for their relationship with God, and with neighbor. God knew that without clear boundaries it would be easy for God's people to loose their way; to forget who they were, and to forget that the Lord loved their neighbor as much as they.

We need some boundaries in order to be whole. We need some walls so we can feel secure. And when those walls are taken away, when those boundaries are breached, we can feel vulnerable, defenseless, exposed, at risk. **BUT IT IS COMPLICATED!**

The Great Wall of China. For centuries the warring tribes within what we now know as China had built walls and fortifications against one another. Then, first under the Qin dynasty, 200 years before Christ, and then under the Ming Dynasty 12 hundred years later, a united China rallied against their foreign enemies and built the Great Wall of China, over 5,000 miles long.

The Great Wall was effective in keeping their enemies at bay. But it also became a metaphor for China's approach to all things foreign…STAY OUT.

I'll never forget the experience I had, as brief as it was, with another wall; the Berlin Wall.

- 1977, European choir tour brought us to Berlin.
- Had a free afternoon, one-day visa to take the train, the S-bahn, from West Berlin to East Berlin.
- I roamed the bleak and deserted blocks adjacent to the wall, past deserted apartment houses, gray and empty.
- Saw East German guards on patrol with submachine guns at the ready.
- Saw the razor wired and steel I-beam tank deflectors embedded in the ground, knew the no man's land between was mined.
- I could feel the weight and oppression of living East of that wall. Even the air seemed heavier.
- Getting back on the train and heading back to the West I found myself breathing again.

Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Twelve years later, when the Wall was effectively breached, euphoria swept Berlin. The chief symbol of the Cold War era had fallen. And a new era of uncertainty, of risk, began.

I talked, recently, with a German citizen who'd traveled from Berlin to see a friend here in the states. He said the security measures now in place for foreign travelers coming to the US reminded him of the measures one used to encounter when entering East Germany during the Cold War.

We all want to be safe as we travel, he said, but America doesn't seem to realize that it has become East Germany.

There are other walls still being erected today. Walls designed to provide the elusive security that nations long to secure.

Israel is building the highly controversial West Bank barrier, a reinforced concrete monstrosity 436 miles long and up to 20 feet high in some sections, a wall designed to be impregnable, to keep out suicide bombers, but could it perhaps also make a final land settlement with Palestinian people a moot point?

And here in the US our government, looking to staunch the estimated million-plus people who cross the nation's border illegally each year, has decided to strengthen 6,000 miles of frontier with both Mexico and Canada. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has created the Secure Border Initiative Network (SBI-Net), a project that's designed to create a "virtual wall" along our nation's borders. Boeing Co. is the prime contractor.[1]

Walls. Boundaries. Safety. Identity. It's an old story. The story that won't go away.

The story of Nehemiah this morning revolves around walls, too. And around the question:

- How do you reclaim land and identity that was once taken from you by force?
- How do you make the place that once was home, home again? And HOME not only in the sense of a secure place to live but HOME as a place where spirit and faith can be revived and restored?

These questions are central to the book of Nehemiah. But the answer it gives is, to say the least, complicated.

Nearly a century had passed since Nehemiah's people had returned from exile to Jerusalem. Though the temple had been rebuilt, the city was barely occupied. More Jews lived in the outlying villages and towns than the holy city itself. They mixed with all kinds of neighboring peoples. The walls of the city were still broken down; the gates were broken or burned.[2]

Nehemiah, upon learning the fate of his people, got a leave of absence from the Persian king he served so he could try to do something about the situation.

By all accounts, Nehemiah was a gifted community organizer. When he arrives in Jerusalem as governor of Judah, with lumber acquired from the royal Persian forests reserves in hand, he puts that gift to work rallying people, brokering truces, and inspiring workers.

---

1 http://globaltechforum.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=rich_story&doc_id=11082&title=US%2FMexico%3A+A+virtual+border&channelid=4&categoryid=28
2 *The New Student Bible*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990. Page 490.

Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

As a result, the wall to the city is repaired, new gates are hung and within fifty-two days Jerusalem is once again secure. This accomplishment becomes the occasion for a community wide celebration.[3]

When the time comes, all the people—men and women, young and old—gather before the Water Gate and they tell the priest, **Ezra**, to bring the book of the law of Moses. And he opens the book and reads from it, and **all the people weep** when they heard God's Torah, God's teaching, God's word. The boundaries that define them as a people are once again in place.

It was a sublime moment, a powerful moment. But here's the complicating part.
Ezra was convinced that in order for God's people were to thrive, faithful Jewish men had to divorce and expel their foreign wives and renounce their children. Narrower boundaries had to be enforced and as a result families were divided.

The call back to Torah became a call to purity. It was the only way Ezra could see a future being possible for his people, God's people.

But Ezra's strategy wasn't the only one the Scriptures speak of. Listen to Isaiah: [56:3-5, 7c]

Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'…
For thus says the Lord:
To [those] 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;
…for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

The new "wall" from Isaiah's vision was not a physical or a cultural barrier, but a boundary based on ethical behavior and justice.[4]

But in the competition between Ezra's vision and Isaiah's, Isaiah lost, or least went underground. And Ezra's approach of separation and purity became the dominant strategy. Until the time of Jesus.

When Jesus stood up to preach at his home congregation and unrolled the scroll, he took his reading from this later section of the prophet Isaiah.

THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, he read,
FOR GOD HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR,
GOD HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES
AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND;
TO LET THE OPPRESSED GO FREE, AND TO PROCLAIM THE LORD'S JUBILEE.

His word to them was not designed to build walls, but to dismantle them.
Not to reinforce the tradition they knew and accepted, but to call the people to a total reorientation of mind and heart.

---

[3] Kim L. Beckmann, *New Proclamation, 2009*. Fortress Press, 2009. Page 85ff.
[4] Ibid, p. 87, 88.

Sermon copyright © 2010 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Later, St. Paul spoke of walls coming down when he described Jesus as the one who, through his own self emptying, broke down the "dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile. [Eph 2:11-22]

> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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, so 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.

God's people around the globe come from a great variety of backgrounds, races, nations, economic classes. Our lives have been shaped by hundreds of different languages and cultures of origin. We live under different political systems and hold different political views. Different histories have molded us—family, tribe, and nation.

When Paul writes to the Corinthians in our second lesson with a message about unity, he is addressing a Christian community which still wet behind the ears, threatened in its youth by deep divisions.

How was this young church going to survive?

Paul gives them a new metaphor for imagining how their differences could become an asset, and we are forever indebted to Paul for that metaphor:

> FOR JUST AS THE BODY IS ONE AND HAS MANY MEMBERS, AND ALL THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY, THOUGH MANY, ARE ONE BODY, SO IT IS WITH CHRIST.

God's word, addressed to the congregation through Paul, opened up a whole new way of seeing and understanding that diversity was not only OK, it was a primary means through which God distributed gifts among his people and called them to meaningful relationships with each other.

FOR IN THE ONE SPIRIT WE WERE ALL BAPTIZED INTO ONE BODY AND WE WERE ALL MADE TO DRINK OF ONE SPIRIT.

Now even though we, here at Peace do not yet reflect the great diversity of the worldwide church, nor are we saddled with the enormous differences of the people at Corinth, there still are plenty of differences between us which could easily and readily divide us.

That we are together here at all is a great testimony to the power of God's word to shape and to reshape us. **That is God's gift to us.** To show us that as diverse an assortment of people as we are, we all belong to, are part of, one body in Christ. Different, yes; but not better or worse.

Healthy boundaries are essential for building healthy communities.
But walls? In Christ all those walls that once divided us, all those things which get in the way of us seeing Christ in one another and becoming the one body in Christ, are broken down. Not by us. But by him. And through the eyes of Christ, that diversity is seen for what it truly is: something to be recognized and celebrated as gift. Amen.