

**Secrets of Abundant Living:
COMMUNITY**

Ephesians 2:11-22

Christ breaks down the walls that separate us.

A sermon preached by
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I read a story last week about a boundary dispute in suburbia. A man was remembering how as a child, his family moved into a new house. His father, an engineer, wanted to make sure the property lines were correct on their property. What he discovered was that the fence between their yard and the neighbor's yard was actually about a foot over the property line. A thin sliver of their neighbor's yard was inside their fence. So the engineer went to the neighbor and explained the situation and offered to buy the strip of land so his fence would be on his property.

For some reason, the neighbor refused to sell his land. And furthermore, he instructed the man's father that he would take care of that strip of land, and for him not to bother it. Unfortunately, the care for the little strip of yard was never coordinated, so the grass was always taller or shorter than the rest of the yard. This irritated the engineer to no end and ended up souring the relationship.

After several years, the uncooperative neighbor moved away, and the house was sold to new owners. The engineer made a new attempt to explain the situation and to buy the strip of yard that had become a point of contention. The new neighbors were glad to do that. So the engineer's yard soon became uniform and neat. The fence was still up, but there was no hostility any more between neighbors. Division had given way to community.

That is pretty much the movement in our text today: from division to community, from hostility to peace. This is one of the secrets of abundant living—the secret of community.

Our Scripture text today follows on the great passage about grace that DeeDee preached on last week. While that text is vertical in orientation, between us and God, this passage is more horizontal in orientation—between us and our neighbors. Two of the commentators I read said, “There is no more relevant text in our world today” than this Scripture.¹ One was writing in 2021; the other was writing 30 years ago. Not much has changed, even since the time of Paul.

There are walls that separate us and create division in our communities. Walls have been constructed throughout history to keep unwanted people out. Hadrian's Wall in England was

constructed in the 2nd century to keep the unconquered tribes of the north out of Roman territory. The Great Wall of China was built to keep out the invading forces from the north of Asia. The Berlin Wall kept the Communists in East Germany more than it kept the capitalists out. Parts of our United States border with Mexico have a wall designed to keep out illegal immigrants.

In addition to physical walls, there are figurative walls that create divisions: religion, politics, race, and gender all put up barriers between different groups of people.

The need for walls—physical or figurative—grows out of fear. Fear of the enemy. Fear of the others not like us. Fear that we will not be in control if we open ourselves to others. But fear is far from where God wants us to live. God’s grace and love create community and cast out fear.

The primary division in the early Church was the wall between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians were grounded in the tradition and laws that gave birth to the Christian movement, and the Gentile Christians came to know Jesus from their background in the Greco-Roman culture, which was used to the worship of many gods. The Gentiles were called “the uncircumcision” by the Jewish Christians to put them a step below. We understand that. We still label people today. Those who are not like us are “haters,” “illegals,” “deplorables,” “looters,” “liberals.” Our labels still put others down, inflict pain on fellow human beings, and separate us from other children of God.

This is where the reconciling work of Christ comes in. Paul explains the division between Jew and Gentile, then he says, “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*”² Those who were out there on the other side of that wall have now been brought inside, into community, into a relationship with Christ. Because “*he is our peace.*”³ Not “he brings peace” or “he wants peace,” but Jesus IS peace. In his body he has made the reconciling move by dying on the cross. So the dividing wall has been broken down: “*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.*”⁴

Some scholars wonder if Paul is making a reference here to the wall that separated the Court of the Jews from the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple in Jerusalem. There was an actual wall there. Archeologists found an inscription from the wall a few years ago that read, “No foreigner may enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death will follow.”⁵ They took their walls seriously!

I tend to think Paul was talking more about a figurative wall. The Gentiles in Ephesus would not have understood the reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, and he says the wall is “the hostility between us.” It doesn’t matter, really. Whether it’s a wall in the Temple or a wall in your heart, they are all doomed to failure. No wall works forever. No wall lasts forever. Go to northern England or China or Berlin today. Those walls are relics of a bygone era. They don’t last because Jesus has done his reconciling work among the people: “*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. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.*”⁶ This is the end of the divisions and hostility—when we all have equal access to the love, grace, and peace of God through Jesus Christ.

This peace is entirely possible even today. People who are hostile can be reconciled; enemies can become friends; communities and churches can be places of both diversity and unity. It can happen.

Much of the success of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine can be traced to two Turkish-born German scientists who form a husband-wife team that previously worked on cancer treatments. Dr. Özlem Türeci and her husband, Dr. Ugur Sahin, started the BioNTech company and partnered with Pfizer last year to bring a vaccine to market in record time.

Making the vaccine required an international partnership. BioNTech had the science; Pfizer had the production capability. But there was a problem. The CEO of Pfizer is from Greece.

The doctors who were BioNTech are from Turkey. Greeks and Turks don't get along; there have been hostilities between the two countries for centuries. But for a larger cause, for the greater good, the Turks and the Greek decided they could put aside their historical hostility and work together. During the course of the project, they even became close friends.⁷

So then, this is what happens. Jesus came to reconcile all things to God, and through him, we can be reconciled to one another. So then, what does this mean? Paul uses three quick images to explain his "so then." "*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.*"⁸ Talking to the Gentiles now, Paul says they are now in the family; they're not outsiders any more. They have the same status as the Jewish believers.

So then, they are "*built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*"⁹ "Apostles and prophets" here may mean the original disciples of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets, or it may just mean the Christians who have the gifts and ministry of apostleship or prophecy. Either way, it means these new Gentile Christians have a foundation of teaching and community that they can depend on. And Jesus is the cornerstone, which in all the ancient construction work was the stone that tied the whole building together. The cornerstone determined how the building would lie on the foundation. If the cornerstone is solid and square, the building will be strong. There is no better cornerstone than Jesus.

So then, "*In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*"¹⁰ This is the famous image of the community of faith as a spiritual temple built by God. In I Corinthians, Paul refers a couple of times to the community as a temple of the Holy Spirit: "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*"¹¹ In Ephesians, he expands the idea to talk about each individual believer as a brick in the wall, so to speak. We join together

with others, and the resulting community is built by individual believers into a beautiful structure that gives glory to God.

This is one of the secrets of abundant living: the secret of community. Despite the walls that divide us, Jesus gave his life to create in us a new community. He is the peace that pervades this new community. In him the walls come tumbling down, and in their place comes a new temple, a temple of the spirit, where God can dwell in every human heart.

So what's the action plan? You have to have a plan if you're going to build this temple. What are we going to do?

First we pray. We pray for the walls to come down. We pray for reconciliation between enemies and parties and factions in our world. We pray that we will be more reconcilers than dividers.

Second, we refuse to be a part of furthering the divisions in the world. We cannot lay bricks in the walls that shut people out—or in. That means we hold our tongues—a lot. We don't make derogatory remarks about people with differing opinions. We don't participate in or tolerate racist or sexist language or humor, even if everybody else thinks it's OK. It's not OK. If you do disagree with someone, do it with respect and civility and attribute to anybody on the other side the best of motives, not the worst. Keep your minds and your mouths on a positive and peaceful plane and refuse to go down the way of division.

Finally, reach out to others who are not like you. Reach over the wall; reach through the fence; and touch the hand of a child of God who is more like you than not like you. The peace of Christ, the new community, comes through relationships.

Ed Gilbreath, a Black Christian journalist and author, was invited to lunch one day by a white Christian pastor. No sooner had they sat down than this guy starts crying and confessing his sins of racism. He admitted that he had lived a privileged and blessed life and that he had tolerated racist behavior in himself and others. He tearfully ended with the plea, "How can I get over this? How can we be friends?"

Ed looked at the guy for a minute, then he said, "Do you like football?" The white pastor seemed puzzled, but said yes. Ed said he did, too. And he liked to cook out. So what this guy needed to do was to come over to Ed's house, bring his wife and

meet Ed's wife, and they could barbecue some steaks and watch football.

The white pastor said, "You want me to come to your house?"

Ed said, "Yes. If you want me to sit here and clear your conscience for all the crap you did, I can't do that. Friendship is not cheap. It takes time and commitment." Ed gave him his home phone number and told him to give him a call. He never heard from the pastor again.¹²

The walls don't come down overnight. It's a work in progress. It's like building a temple. The Temple in Jerusalem was built three times, but it was a fairly quick construction project, only a few decades at most each time. The great cathedrals of Europe, on the other hand, averaged 300 years under construction. The two great world churches that are now still under construction are St. John the Divine in New York City and the Basilica of the Holy Family in Barcelona, Spain. St. John has been under construction since 1892, and the church in Barcelona since 1882. They are works in progress.

Our lives are a work in progress. Our church is a work in progress. But you don't make progress unless you undertake the work. And the work is reconciliation. But take heart. Christ is our peace. We are no longer strangers in this community. We are a temple. And the walls are going to come down.

¹ James Howell, "Weekly Preaching, July 18, 2021," *Ministrymatters.com*, and Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), 32.

² Ephesians 2:13.

³ Ephesians 2:14.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ http://www.biblehistory.net/Wall_of_Separation.pdf.

⁶ Ephesians 2:15-18.

⁷ Alex Joyner, "Waiting on a Covid-19 Vaccine," *MinistryMatters.com*, 12/2/20.

⁸ Ephesians 2:19.

⁹ Ephesians 2:20.

¹⁰ Ephesians 2:21-22.

¹¹ I Corinthians 3:16-17

¹² Ed Gilbreath, *Reconciliation Blues* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008). *PreachingToday.com*.