

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Saturday, July 22, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who knows how the trouble started? All I know is, for the last six years of his life, my father's uncle—my great Uncle Hart—refused to come to any gatherings of our family. He didn't call; he didn't drop in for a chat. He lived in the same small town as his brother's widow, my grandmother, but for six years he never knocked on her door.

It wasn't even her fault. It had something to do with my parents and a birthday party they were hosting for my grandmother. My dad called Uncle Hart to invite him to come. My dad also invited the cousins and a few other extended family members. But, when he invited Uncle Hart, my dad neglected to invite Uncle Hart's girlfriend. That is the incident which prompted the building of a wall of silence between Uncle Hart and the rest of the family.

Now, for some reason, Uncle Hart did respond to **my** Christmas cards. He even sent me a gift of money when I was ordained a pastor. Of course, one relative cynically suggested Uncle Hart merely wanted me to put in a good word for him with my "Boss."

My dad pleaded for reconciliation, asked for forgiveness for the unintended slight. To no avail. The wall stood firm. I guess the cliché is wrong—blood **isn't** necessarily thicker than water. These people who once sat at the same table and shared food and laughter and joy were now divided. How high the wall loomed. Invisible, but nonetheless impenetrable.

Walls **can** be visible, you know. Think back to Old Testament times. The temple in Jerusalem had a wall which carefully and clearly separated the Jews, God's chosen people, from the non-Jews, the Gentiles, as our Bible refers to them. The wall was there to keep the Jews, whose laws required ritual cleanliness, from becoming unclean. The wall kept them from the contamination they believed they'd experience if they came in contact with a non-Jew.

And the Gentiles, after all, had a different culture, different religious practices, different rules for daily life. They were, well, **different**. They were not God's chosen people, as the Jews understood themselves to be. And so the visible wall became the symbol for the invisible wall of hostility that existed and persisted through the generations. People created out of the same dust, breathed into by the same Spirit, granted life by the same God—these people lived divided. How high the wall loomed.

If I were a betting person, I'd say the odds are pretty good that many of you here have a story like mine. Somewhere, someone in your extended family is Uncle Hart (maybe he's even you)—someone who believes someone else has done them wrong—and maybe someone has—or maybe no one can remember how the wall came about. All you know is the present result. People are hurt, defensive, bitter, *incommunicado*. There's an empty chair at family gatherings. If you see each other on the street, heads turn the other way, or conversations are strained and uncomfortable. Blood is not thicker than water; the wall seems tall and sturdy.

Remember the poem by Robert Frost called "Mending Wall"? In this poem, Frost relates the story of an annual spring ritual that he and his neighbor perform. They mend the stone wall between their properties after the winter's wrath. The constant freezing and melting, contracting and expanding, has upturned the soil and knocked the stone wall over. Frost, amazed at how sections of the wall keep falling down, writes, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall."

Would that all of us humans were perfect and sinless, and could just go back to the beginning in our relationships, before our walls were ever constructed. We could be like Frost, when he wrote, "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offense."

But we're **not** perfect. We sin, and our fractured relationships bear the consequence. We don't bother asking what we're walling in or out. We build walls anyway, and give offense to the person on the other side.

Ahh, but I hold onto Frost's words: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall . . ." In Frost's poem, he playfully suggests elves must be at work, tearing down the wall, but we know it's God's amazing creation which keeps uprooting the stones. Or perhaps . . . perhaps it's **God himself** who doesn't love a wall.

St. Paul suggests exactly that to the Christian churches at Ephesus in our first lesson. He declares to the church that God broke **down** the wall between the Jewish Christians and the gentile Christians. Recall the words we heard: *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.*

Christ didn't break down that wall with a handful of elves, or destroy it through the frozen ground swell. He didn't tear stone off of stone as if he were Superman. Jesus Christ destroyed the dividing wall by the humble giving of himself to the world, by the sacrifice of his own body to forgive the sins of the people on **either** side of the wall.

Paul tells the Ephesians that Gentile Christians as well as Jewish Christians have access to God. No one was more precious in his sight than another. God called both people, near and far, to him. The visible and invisible walls were gone; the rules that kept them apart, the hostility that had built up—God through his son Jesus Christ tore all of that down. And if there was no longer any wall between them, it meant they were no longer two groups but one. They were linked to each other—all God’s children. All peoples were invited to worship the same reconciling God, invited to the same table to commune together with God and one another. Wrote Paul: *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God . . .*

Here is a case where, for once, blood is indeed thicker than water. Christ’s blood has the power to restore his brothers and sisters to each other and to God.

Five years after building a wall, my great Uncle Hart suffered a stroke and a heart attack. My Grandmother Rouse heard about it through the grapevine of their small town, and went to visit him in the hospital. You might say he was a captive audience at the time. I’m not going to tell you some sloppily sentimental story about how all the hurts were forgotten, and that there was some sort of glorious tearful reunion. That isn’t what happened. What I do know is this—that for a moment, my grandmother was enabled to live and act as if the wall were no longer there, put aside the bitterness that had built up over years. She didn’t tear stone off of stone as if she were Superman. Rather, I believe that she was filled by Holy Spirit with compassion for Uncle Hart—a compassion that could only come from Christ. She went to this sick, old man, and humbly offered herself, her presence to him. She offered Christ to him. *Something there is that doesn’t love a wall . . .*

I pray for you and your families, as well as for mine. I pray to our God who reconciles us that he may grant you opportunities, grace-filled moments where you, like my grandmother, will be able to offer your presence, your very self, humbly, to your Uncle Hart. Where you will also be offering Christ. Where you will be moved by the Holy Spirit to live and act as if there is no more wall. And I pray the redeeming love of Jesus will heal your hurts, and then sustain your hope that one day he will tear down all walls which separate his beloved people. For something there is that doesn’t love a wall . . . and it is our Lord. **AMEN.**