TEARING DOWN WALLS, BUILDING UP TEMPLES
Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-14 and Ephesians 2:11-22

FOCUS: We are called to tear down all walls of bitterness and hatred and build up temples of love and grace with Jesus as our keystone.

For the McCullough family it has been 36 Richardson Drive for the past fifteen years. Before that it was 119 South Roberta Ave in Dothan. When we were first married, for Kathy and me it was in a rather humble apartment on the Southside of Birmingham, then later 8517 Division Avenue in the East Lake neighborhood of Birmingham. For most of my childhood and youth it was at 1321 Saulter Road in Homewood. For a while it was in a tiny dorm room at Samford University and then it was in a two room concrete block cottage with bare concrete floors in Arusha Tanzania East Africa. For me, they have all been home.

Isn’t it interesting that I can remember all those addresses? I bet you can remember most of yours, and some of you have had way more than have I. There is just something special about home. It is, or at least ought to be a place of comfort and safety. It is where the things which define reside. It is where we are anchored. How many kids, I was one of them, have uttered those mournful words while at summer camp or on a sleepover in strange surroundings. ***“I just want to go home”***. Who among us has not thought toward the end of a particularly stressful day at school or work, ***Man, I just want to go home!”***

In our Old Testament text David is delighted to be home. He had not always been able to rest comfortably in a fine palace. He had grown up as a shepherd boy, the youngest in the family, the one who would have probably either had to share a bed with another young sibling or slept on the couch were his a modern story. Many nights he slept under the stars as he guarded the sheep. To be sure he had spent time in the Kings palace as a young man, playing music, entertaining and pleasing Saul. But that had not lasted. When Saul got wind of the fact that David had been anointed as his future successor he turned on David and for a season David was on the run from the king, he couldn’t go home for fear of his life. Then after ascending the throne David had endured wars and fierce battles. But now there was time for him to enjoy the comforts of home, to settle in to reflect. We read that God had given David rest from the battles with his enemies.

As he reflected, David’s thoughts went, for the first time in a while, to the God who had seen him through difficult days. In the quiet of his massive home he had time to ponder, something he had almost surely failed to do along the way. He probably was having a few pangs of guilt for his inattention. So what do we do when we are feeling guilty? We try to somehow make up for our transgressions. How many pieces of jewelry or bunches of roses have been sent in hopes of mending frayed relationships? How many cards have been sent wishing well those we know we have slighted? How many usually avoided chores have been done in hopes of getting out of the doghouse? It is just human nature to try to make up for our failures. David certainly had his fair share of faults and transgressions and he would add too them as life went on.

So what to do to make amends for having failed to be attentive to his spiritual life? Again the guilt pops to mind. ***“Man, I have this great house, and one at the beach and another in the mountains. Life is good, God has blessed me, so I know what I will do, I’ll build God a house so God can know the joy of being at home.”*** It sounds like a pretty good idea. There had once been an elaborate temple, a place for God to hang out, a home for God there in the holy of holies, a place where God could get away from the crowds. Or so David probably thought. After all while David had quite a bit on his plate, God had far more. If David needed a place to unwind, a place to call home, surely God did as well.

So David called in his prophet, Nathan, and told him of his discomfort with the fact that, while he resided in luxury, the God who had provided it all for him was still hanging out in a well-worn tent. ***“Great idea”.*** said Nathan***”*** ***“Go do just as you are planning for God is with you.”***  So far, so good. But there is a problem. It is a problem prophets, preachers and good Christian folks have had since the beginning of time and which is as rampant today as ever. Nathan dared speak for God without ever actually seeking God’s wisdom and direction. And David decided what he wanted to do for God without consulting the one to be honored. Another very human mistake. Don’t we all at times rush to do something for someone only to find that what we did was not really what they needed or what they wanted. Haven’t we all feigned delight at receiving that gift that will never be used. The thought was good, and as the old adage goes it does count for something, but there are times when it just makes sense to consult the recipient. When it comes to our relationship with God that time is all the time.

Nathan didn’t ask, but God spoke any way. The voice came that night. God had much to say but for our purposes let’s focus on this issue of tents and permanent homes. God‘s voice came clearly to Nathan. ***“Go tell David that I said, “Why are you looking to build me a house to live in? A tent has done just fine for many long years, in many different places. I haven’t ever said that I*** ***wanted a physical house built, the tent is all I need right now”.*** At the timeGod was not interested in having a permanent home. God was about being where the people were, where all the people were. The voice of God continues and instructs Nathan to tell David that God is going to make him a house. Notice closely the language, not make a house for him, rather make of him a house. God was not speaking of brick and mortar, he was speaking of David’s lineage. God was proclaiming the dynastic house of descendants which would find ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.

You and I have a part in that dynasty as we will see as we turn to the text from the letter to the church in Ephesus. We really need to look back at what came immediately prior to the verses we have read this morning. There we read ***“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”***

The writer is encouraging and challenging a church which has become rather provincial. They were good folks, faithful and supportive. Worship was well attended and the members were quick to support each other. But they were not quite as eager to be about meeting the needs of others, especially others who were not like them, who had “strange” ideas and different complexions. Ironically these Gentiles were guilty of the same sin of which they had once been victims. It is that most universal of human failures, prejudice. That is why the writer of the letter, and we are not sure it was Paul, it may have been someone familiar with Paul’s theology or one of Paul’s followers, whoever it was, the author is focused on both the grace of God and the lack of grace which was coming to mark the life of the church.

Having reminded the readers that their salvation had come through faith, as a gift of grace from God. Having made clear the understanding that salvation was not the result of works, not a reward for the accomplishment of any special feat. The author reminds the people from whence they had come. To those who now considered themselves insiders, the message was, ***“remember where you came from, remember your heritage. Remember what it felt like to be derided as those who were uncircumcised.”*** It had not been long at all since all faithful Jews considered all Gentiles to be almost less than human.

Remember your heritage, and let that remembrance inform your attitudes. That was the message to the Ephesian church. It had not taken long for the once outcast Gentiles to begin thinking of themselves a privileged insiders. I can’t help but think of some of the rhetoric I hear concerning immigration now. We all talk about our heritage as Americans. We proudly fly the flag and proclaim our natural citizenship. And so should we. But as we get all fired up about all those folks coming across our border we forget that not all that many generations ago all our ancestors arrived on these shores from somewhere else. Unless we are directly descended from a Native American heritage, we all are from immigrant roots.

I don’t mean to initiate a debate on immigration policy. Like most of the issues which divide us these days that is a much more complicated matter than the most vocal folks on either side would have us believe. But I do want us to recognize the way that we, like the folks in that ancient church, tend to fall into the trap of claiming privilege and superiority to which we may not be entitled. And it is not just when it comes to the matter of immigration. We have become skilled at choosing sides. Now that is not all bad. When it comes to important matters we need to be willing to take a stand, to have principled opinions. But if we are to be true disciples of Christ we must avoid the temptation to demonize those with whom we disagree. We might even do well to realize that there is always that remote chance that we are actually wrong.

This week Jim Sanders, my friend who serves First Methodist in Dothan posted these words as one of his periodic meditations. ***"I May Be Wrong" were the words printed on the bumper sticker of the truck in front of me at the intersection of West Main and Park." I May Be Wrong". I believe it takes a special person to make that kind of statement. A lot of people I know believe they are right one hundred percent of the time. They scare me. The truth is, when I find myself thinking that I'm one hundred percent right, I scare myself! “I May Be Wrong" just might leave being right one hundred percent of the time to the purview of God. "I May Be Wrong" might help me relate better with those who are certain I am wrong! “I May Be Wrong" might create some holy space in my life for tolerance, grace, soul growth, genuine humility, and kindness toward others. What might "I May Be Wrong" create in your life? “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” ~Philippians 2:3.*** Challenging words from my fellow pastor.

After reminding the Ephesians that they had once been called the uncircumcised the writer goes one further and makes certain that the people understand the impact of his message as he declares that they were in fact aliens with no hope and without God. The English translation doesn’t fully reflect the shock value of the message. The Greek word used was atheos which carried with it more than the notion of being foreign. To be called atheos was to be called uncivilized, subhuman. It was the strongest of insults. The people would have certainly been cut to the quick by such an inference. And that was exactly the response that was intended. There could have been no more dramatic reminder of the grace which had been poured out on them. But that was not all. There was to also an implied challenge to the church, and to us, to remember that grace and to hear a clear call to offer it to those we might be tempted to call atheos.

We all do it, think atheos even if we would never say it out loud. It might be specific, someone we just can’t seem to get along with, someone who just gets on our nerves. It might be a whole class of people. We are pretty skilled at painting whole classes of folks with an exceptionally broad brush. Liberals or conservatives, republicans or democrats, pro-lifers or pro-choice advocates, climate charge alarmists or global warning skeptics, black or white. Them and us, it is an age old destructive notion.

Some years ago we used to watch Extreme Makeover Home Edition. One of the most popular parts of each show and a part which always drew cheers form the large gathered crowd was the demolition phase. There is just something about us that gets a kick out of tearing things down. We have all watched clips on TV of implosions of large multistoried buildings covered enthusiastic reporters. And who doesn’t love a demolition derby where the whole purpose is destruction. But when it comes to those dividing walls that Ephesians talks about, we are not nearly so eager be about demolition.

But that is surely our calling. It is the proper response to the ministry and mission of Christ. What a shame that he came and broke down the dividing wall only to have us become rather proficient at building it right back up. There is a phrase from Robert Frost’s poem, Mending Walls which is often repeated out of context. He writes ***“Good fences make good neighbours.”*** But if you read the whole poem you will discover that those words are spoken not by Frost but by the neighbor with whom he is carrying on an imagined conversation as they mend a stone fence after a harsh winter. Actually Frost questions the logic as he writes these words.

 *Why* do they make good neighbours?  Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 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 offence.

In The Message we read this concerning dividing walls. ***“Christ tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped.”***

I fear that we have become a people too busy writing in fine print and reading footnotes to be about the important business of tearing down walls. But tear them down we must if we are to be faithful disciples. Only as the old walls have come down can we begin to build a temple for God. Buildings are not bad, hopefully we will soon begin once again planning to rebuild our church. Having told David not to build, it would later be God’s desire that Solomon rebuild the temple. It just wasn’t a task for which David had been destined. But there is another temple which is much more important than anything we can make with wood and stone.

Our epistle text speaks of the fellowship of those who have benefitted from the removal of the wall which dived them. It says that they are growing into a holy temple, becoming a dwelling place for God. We are told that it is a structure with Christ as the cornerstone. However a better translation would be Christ as the keystone which is a much more dramatic image. The keystone is the central stone at the summit of an arch, which locks the whole together. Take it out and the arch collapses. So it is when we seek to remove the keystone of Christ from our fellowship or from our individual lives, things come crashing down.

As those who bear the name of Jesus it is our mission in life to both tear down walls of division and build up temples of love and grace with the example of the life of Christ as the keystone. It is our calling to become dwelling places, homes for the Spirit of God. For your sake, for the sake of a world mistakenly convinced that, despite the fact that there are no proverbial cows, good fences make good neighbors, and for the sake of the kingdom of the one whose purpose is still to tear down walls, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.