

Peace Personified

sermon digest

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Ephesians 2:14-22

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If you were asked by someone outside your faith and culture, what is the center of your religion, how would you answer? Religions are often distorted at the fringes. Just as moderate Muslims protest that the Koran does not support terrorism or violent Jihad, Christians have sometimes had to protest that our faith is not to be identified with the medieval Crusades to the Holy Land or the Spanish Inquisition. The question in the Gospels employs the metaphor of a cornerstone that ties a building together; in Paul it is the foundation on which a building is constructed; but the center of Christian faith is always more than a building. In fact, the churches of the New Testament were identified with communities without address. The earliest churches were never identified with a pile of stones with a sign in the yard; they were communities of people who were gathered around a faith center. They met in homes at first. Later, in history they gathered in Roman catacombs—burial places. But always, the church was a community of persons, not a place.

For early Christians the center of our faith was personal; it focused on Jesus whom we believe to be the Christ. Christianity, the great world religion with literally thousands of divisions, and a rich, sometimes embarrassing, history began as a Jesus movement. The Christian faith was always more than an institution, a hierarchy, a location, a building, a denomination, or even a theology. It was a movement that proceeded from the life and ministry of the man Jesus. From the earliest days of Jesus' ministry, disciples were simply followers committed to continuing his life and ministry through the community called *church*.

Walls must come down. Churchill coined the metaphor for Soviet isolation behind an "Iron Curtain." We remember well the real wall that was constructed between East and West Germany in the city of Berlin and the political rhetoric of John Kennedy, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," and the demand of Ronald Reagan, "Mr. Krushchev, tear down this wall." Walls are symbols of division. Tim and I were working together in pastoral ministry. We revised the church newsletter with a new name and spent days scratching our heads for the right word to put on the masthead. One day I was sitting in Tim's office and noticed the hanging on his wall with the statement: "People are lonely because they build walls instead of bridges." I said, "That's it! Let's call our newsletter 'The Bridge.' What we are trying to do is build bridges instead of walls."

Paul struggled with walls of division. He knew well the Temple wall that blocked the court of the Gentiles from the inner courts of the Jews. He knew its posted warning that whatever "foreigner" dared venture into the sanctuary would have no one but himself to blame "for the death which will inevitably follow." Paul had suffered lashings at the hands of Jewish authorities and had early in his ministry spoken ominously of God's wrath resting upon Israel (I Thess. 2:16). He staked his entire ministry upon giving Gentiles full and equal access to God's grace in Christ and with every fiber of his being sought to bring Jewish and Gentile Christians together into one body in Christ. In his letter to the Romans, he anguished over the growing sense of superiority among Gentile Christians, assuring them that God had not forgotten God's covenant with Israel and all of Israel would be saved (Rom. 11:26, 29). As a sign of unity in Christ, he gathered offerings from Gentile Christians which he delivered to suffering Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. There in the midst of his mission of mercy, he was arrested and sent to prison in Caesarea and Rome. Ephesians, written either by Paul from his prison cell or written by a close associate of Paul's soon after his death, resounds with Paul's concern for the peace of Christ to be the tie that binds the church together as one body.

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* suggests that the opposite of *peace* is *war*. For Paul it was much more basic. Peace fails at the point of hostile division. Before there is war, there is hostility. Before there is *apartheid*, segregation, or racial conflict, there is hostility. Just as Jesus located the root of murder in hatred and the root of adultery in lust, Paul located the root cause of violence in our world in building walls of division, hostility toward others.

Peace must be personal. In *God and Empire* John Dominic Crossan locates the beginnings of the Christian faith in a matrix of Judaism with the Roman Empire. To understand Jesus or the thinking of the church of the first century, we must be familiar with the world in which Jesus was born and his kingdom conceived. Crossan had a slide with images of Augustus Caesar on the left and Jesus of Nazareth on the right. Down the center was a list of titles that they shared in common—Lord, god, son of god, prince of peace, etc. Crossan, then noted the difference between the *Pax Romana*, the peace of Rome, and the peace that passes all understanding in Christ Jesus. Paul, a diaspora Jew and citizen of the Roman Empire, was particularly articulate in making the distinction. Crossan listed the path for Augustus as Religion-War-Victory-Peace. Then, he listed the way of Christ as Religion-Non-violence-Justice-Peace. The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus was different from any notion of peace the world had ever known. For all of the ages of human history we have conceived of peace through war; peace is finally domination. Jesus came preaching peace through justice. Peace is the fair distribution of the sources of life from creation. Peace is taking down

the walls of division in order to construct walls of inclusion. The word for church, *ekklesia*, is about bringing people together around the center of our faith. Jesus was, is, and ever shall be our peace.