



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

Walls

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 19, 2015
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Ephesians 2:11-22*

A few summers ago, on Pride Sunday, after enjoying a cookout lunch together on the upstairs terrace, our St. Bart's group walked downtown to line up on for the Pride March. We were, I say proudly, a motley crew—gay and straight, male and female, all ages, children, even a dog or two. We carried our giant St. Bart's banner and our St. Bart's swag: t-shirts, knapsacks, flags, St. Bart's cards to hand out to the crowds. We were ready to march.

I'd understood that all Episcopal churches would be grouped together, as a sort of vanguard for our diocesan float bearing the Bishop as the grand Episcopal finale, rather like Santa Claus as the grand finale of the Macy's Christmas parade. This year, however, the lineup seemed to have a more fluid design. Our St. Bart's group arrived at our appointed side street and got in line. To our utter amazement, we found ourselves lined up behind the Wiccans. With great interest, we observed this exotic group (and vice versa). Soon we realized another group had lined up behind us. When we turned to greet them, we found not another Episcopal Church group, but people bearing a sign advertising themselves to be the Anti-Circumcision group.

So there we were: St. Bart's, sandwiched between the Wiccans and the Anti-Circumcision group. We reflected theologically on that for some time. Eventually, we all marched off together, and it was great!

Now that's all I'm going to say about circumcision today, except to note that the writer of Ephesians is making the point that the Ephesians (Gentiles, the uncircumcised) and the Jews (the people of Israel, the circumcised) acted as two completely different groups. One group the insiders, one group the outsiders. Who were the insiders and who were the outsiders depended on perspective, same as it does with us today. These two groups weren't simply on different theological pages; they really did not share life. Though they may have had occasional everyday interactions, they did not eat at the same table.

In studying our readings for this week, the words that struck me most deeply were "broken down the dividing wall." Some walls seem like good things. These, for instance, create this stunning, safe, air-conditioned space we have to worship in. The phrase, "Good fences make good neighbors" came quickly to mind. I do like some fences: attractive ones that keep the neighbors' dogs from digging up my plants, or worse. Or the ones I see when I visit friends in CT: tall wire fences that keep the deer from eating all the shrubs in the winter. I like my office walls. Once upon a time I worked in a company that did not believe in walls; everyone, even the president, worked in a cubicle. I'm not sure that increased productivity.

Some physical walls are fortifications for protection, some claim territory, some are to control who/what comes in/out. We might think of the Great Wall of China. Hadrian's Wall in England. The Berlin Wall. The Mexico-United States barrier. We may think of the Israeli West Bank barrier or "separation wall." Does it protect from acts of terrorism? Is it in effect establishing new borders? Both positions are argued. It does restrict movement of Palestinians to and from work.

We humans are adept at creating walls, and not just physical walls. We also create social walls: walls that may not be physical structures but are just as effective in separating us from each other. These tend to be more subtle, often invisible—until you run into one. Think: Socioeconomic class. Race. Sex. Gender. Political systems, like apartheid, Jim Crow, redlining. Even religion divides, sometimes most viciously of all. I read this week this about people coming to church: “They come seeking God, but we give them religion.”

Barbara Ehrenreich is an American author and political activist. She spoke at Trinity Institute here in Manhattan this past winter. Her spiritual autobiography was one of those we studied in our Spring Wednesday evening series here at St. Bart’s. What I learned about her made me want to read more of her books, of which there are many. (Summer reading!) One of her books is called *Nicked and Dimed*. Barbara, a professional writer, decided to work low-wage jobs in four different areas of the country in order to experience that way of life firsthand. She worked as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing home aide, and Wal-Mart associate. What she found was that even by working seven days a week—seven long days a week, she could not make even minimal ends meet.

One of Ehrenreich’s most powerful first-hand learnings: how invisible the poor of our country are. The poor see the affluent because they are highly visible in our culture. But it doesn’t work the other way. The affluent don’t see the poor. The two groups are less and less likely to share spaces and services. No wonder Jesus spoke so much about money. It is a powerful dividing wall.

There are other, even more private and painful dividing walls. These are the ones that spring up, sometimes in an instant, between long-time friends, between members of a family. An action harms. Words hurt. Hurt or harm may be unintended. But offense is taken. And a wall goes up. Sometimes it stays firmly in place for many years, even for a lifetime. I daresay most of us know this kind of dividing wall, some of us more personally than we would wish.

Whatever it is that divides us, the writer of Ephesians says, God has come in Christ to heal our divisions. To break down those dividing walls. So that there are no more insiders or outsiders, because we are all of the same household: God’s household.

The interesting thing is that God does not require—nor should we—that one group change to become like the other group. Everyone does not have to become Christian—or Episcopalian, or Wiccan or Anti-Circumcision—in order to be in God’s household. God’s household does not require uniformity, only unity. Each person—each person, period—is recognized as a member of the same household.

What is our responsibility as followers of Christ, when we know only too well these seemingly intact, intractable dividing walls? We promise in our Baptism vows to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.” It’s our hands, our feet, our hearts, our minds that God will use to dismantle the walls, chip by chip, brick by brick, section by section.

The Berlin wall, after 28 years, finally came down, piece by piece. Interestingly, whole sections of the Great Wall of China and Hadrian’s Wall have disappeared, the stones long ago carted away for building homes, barns, roads. Sort of a wall version of swords into plowshares.

The Confederate flag came down from the South Carolina state capital on July 10, after flying on those grounds for 54 years. What that flag symbolized, of course, is much older. When that flag came down, at least a few bricks got removed from an old wall that needs to come down.

What removed those bricks? I believe it was largely the forgiveness offered to Dylann Roof by the families of the people he killed. It was Charleston’s decision to stand together in support, their refusal to give in to hate. Their determination to see each other, regardless of color, as beloved children of God. I think that’s what removed those bricks.

God's deep desire and design is for the walls that divide us to come down. So what can we do? I suggest each of us try this for just one day. Or maybe just one hour. Let's try to see—really see—each person as beloved child of God. For me, that is especially hard in the subway, but I am going to try.

And if there is one of these painful dividing walls between you/I and someone else, let's consider how you/I might take just one brick out. Or maybe just one chip. Let's think about reaching out. Let's consider if you/I could forgive—or ask for forgiveness.

If that seems impossible, then let's simply study our particular wall. Let's look at it really closely. Walk around it. Walk around it again, and again. Let's keep walking around that wall, studying it. Praying about it. If we keep doing that, then one day, like the walls of Jericho, that wall might just come tumbling down.

Let's break down our dividing walls. Let's use the stones to build a house for **all** of us.

Let's build God's house.

Amen.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022