

"A Return To Normalcy"
Sermon by the Reverend Jeffrey S. Miller
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“For he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.” On the morning of August 13, 1961, the citizens of Berlin, Germany awoke to find that the border between the eastern and western parts of their city had been closed by the Soviet authorities. Shortly after midnight, while most people were sleeping soundly in their beds, a military convoy loaded with soldiers and construction workers rumbled through the now deserted streets. It stopped, the soldiers dismounted, the construction workers climbed down and immediately the men began tearing up the sidewalks digging holes and planting concrete barriers and stringing barbed wire.

By dawn the border had been sealed tight. What had previously been a very fluid environment was now very rigid indeed. No longer would it be possible for East Berliners to travel to the west in order to catch a football game or go to the opera. No longer was it going to be possible for young lovers to rendezvous in a park for romantic stroll or for relatives to cross town for an afternoon visit. No longer was it going to be possible for those in one part of the city to pass to another part in order to find better, more lucrative forms of employment.

Now on whichever side of the border a person happened to go to sleep on the night of August the 12th on that side of the border, they were destined to remain for years to come. What would eventually become known as the Berlin Wall would for the next three decades stand not only as a physical barrier between the eastern and western parts of Germany, but more importantly, it would serve as a very powerful symbolic barrier between these two competing ideologies, Soviet communism on the one hand and Western democracy on the other.

Now what's strange is that just a few years before, these two adversaries had actually been allies, allies in the struggle against Hitler and the Nazis. But now they who had gone to war together were at war with each other and as evidence of this tragic turn of events, there it stood a vast concrete barrier over 100 miles long, an ugly scar on the face of the land, a real life example of what the Apostle Paul and today's epistle lesson calls “a dividing wall of hostility.”

You know, for those of us who happened to live through the Cold War era, the Berlin Wall was a vivid reminder of the kind of alienation and hostility that's so often characterizes the human condition. Well whether it's the physical barriers that we have a tendency to erect like the Berlin wall or Israel's West Bank barrier, or the more subtle but equally real divisions that we all erect on the basis of race or class or economic background, the fact remains that we live in a state of profound alienation.

Nations rage against nations, ethnic groups battle against ethnic groups, sometimes the members of one's own family are at war with each other. And the really sad thing is that we have lived with this situation for so long that we think this is just the way it is, we think this is the way it's always been and this is the way it's always going to be, for you see, if you live with abnormality long enough it can begin to feel and look normal.

Reminds me of a story that I read some years ago, I think it was a Reader's Digest about a man who went to see his doctor, suffering from a terrible throat condition. The doctor took a light and looked in the man's mouth and scowled. He said, "my goodness, your throat is a mess. It's all ulcerated and inflamed, what seems to be the problem?" The man shrugged his shoulders and he said, "Well, Doc, I don't know but I can tell you this much, it's a lot worse than the morning." And the doctor said, "well, you'd better tell me about your morning routine. And don't leave anything out."

The man said, "alright, the alarm goes off at seven o'clock. I get up, I go to the bathroom and wash my face. I go downstairs and I have a cup of coffee and I eat a bowl of cereal and then I throw up and I brush my teeth." "You do what?" Said the doctor, man said, "I get up at seven o'clock I go to the bathroom I wash my face, I go downstairs, I have a cup of coffee, I eat a bowl of cereal then I throw up," "you throw up?" said the doctor. "Yes", said the man, doctor said, "well, you, you do realize that is not normal." And the man replied, "I've been doing it for years, I assumed that's just the way things worked."

Well you see you and I have been living with hostility and alienation and separation for so long that we assume this is just the way things work. We assume that this is normal but the Apostle Paul here in the Ephesians chapter two reminds us this is not normal, which is to say, this is not what God intended for his people. If you read the opening chapters of the Bible, you find that God looks on his creation and he says, it is not good for man to be alone.

I've always said that cats were created to be solitary creatures but human beings were not. We were created to live in fellowship and peace with one another. We were created in the image of God, a God who as Trinity of Persons lives in dynamic unity and communion and fellowship, a God in whom there is no division or conflict of purpose. And that's why the Apostle Paul reminds us that at the very heart of the Christian gospel, at the very heart of the Christian proclamation is the message of reconciliation.

It is the message of mended relationships. It is the message of the dividing walls of hostility torn down once and for all. And in the verses that follow, Paul goes on to explain to us how it is that this state of normalcy is finally achieved. He suggests to us three things. First, Paul says, if there is ever to be peace on earth, that is peace between warring peoples, whether that's warring nations, warring clans or warring family members, there must first, he says, be peace with God.

Paul's point is really very simple. All of the hostility that you and I see in the world today, all of the separation, all of the alienation, all of these things are mere symptoms of a much deeper problem, a profound alienation from our Creator. Some of you may recall that back in the 1970s there was a movie that came out starring Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand called "The Way We Were." It was a romantic film about a young couple who fell in love but as the years went by, they drifted apart until finally one day they look back with wistfulness nostalgic longing for the good old days at the way they were.

Up here in this morning's epistle, the apostle Paul paints for us a picture of the way we were, apart from God, and it is anything but wistful or nostalgic. In verse 12, Paul writes, remember that at one time you were separated from Christ, you were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, you were strangers to the covenants of promise, you were without hope, and you were without God in the world.

So any way you look at it, that's a pretty bleak picture, isn't it? And the problem is we have a hard time believing that it's that bad. You know, if you really press people today, they would probably be willing to admit that their relationship with God is not everything that it really should be. Many people would probably be willing to admit that their relationship with God is not as intimate as they would like it to be. But few people would be willing to admit that it's as bad as Paul makes out here. Paul says we're strangers, aliens, foreigners; we're separated from Christ we're without hope and without God in the world. We think surely it can't be that bad.

Sort of like that hymn Amazing Grace. You know, Amazing Grace is the most popular hymn in the English language. It has been recorded more times than any song in history. And let's be honest, it is difficult to sing that hymn without something like a tear forming in the corner of your eye. But often when we're singing it with great gusto, I wonder if we really believe the words we're saying.

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Be honest, how many of us really think of ourselves as wretched individuals. "I once was lost, but now am found, I once was blind but now I see." Oh, we think this has got to be a little bit of exaggeration, Semitic hyperbole to make a point, but certainly were not as bad as that. But I want you to understand this is exactly how the Bible depicts us in terms of our relationship with God.

Sin has created a dividing wall between us and our Creator. We are lost, we are blind, we are wretched. And Paul says that is just the problem because that vertical relationship with God has been impaired, our horizontal relationships are likewise impaired. Listen, you know how this

works. We understand family dynamics. If one person in a family happens to be off kilter that affects everybody else, doesn't it?

It's often the case that if mom and dad are always fighting with each other, that is going to trickle down and affect the children. It's frequently the case that if a man does not have a healthy or productive relationship with his father, he doesn't have a healthy and productive relationship with his own children, or even with his spouse. You see if there is ever to be peace on earth, if there is ever to be a return to normalcy, if there is ever to be peace between brothers and sisters, there must first Paul says, be peace with God.

Second, Paul goes on to say that if there is ever to be peace with God that peace can only come by one means: through faith and the finished and atoning work of Jesus Christ. Listen again to the way Paul puts it in verse 12. He says, "remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, you are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, you were strangers to the covenants of promise, you were without hope, and without God in the world but now, but now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down into his flesh the dividing wall of hostility."

It's important to note that when Paul speaks of the effects of sin in this passage, he doesn't say that sin simply creates a dividing wall between man and God. Now, of course, that's true. But Paul is far more specific here. What he says is that sin actually creates a dividing wall of hostility. Listen, folks, the Berlin Wall was no mere barrier, like a hedge row or a picket fence. It was a dividing wall of hostility. It had machine gun emplacements and armed guards and real bullets. And that's because these two parties were not simply at odds with each other. They were at war with each other.

Now somebody might say yeah, but it was just a Cold War. Well, if you live through that period, if you live through something like the Cuban Missile Crisis, you know, Cold War, hot war, it was a time fraught with great peril. And scripture says that is our relationship in terms of God. We are not merely separated from God. We are by virtue of our sin, actually at war with God. Remember that the sin of Eden, my friends, was not that Adam and Eve ate of forbidden fruit. The problem was that the man and the woman ate of the forbidden fruit in order to what, be like God. They wanted to be the masters of their own fate. They wanted to be the captains of their own destiny. They wanted to in a sense kick God off the throne and put themselves on it and be sovereign.

And that is why the scripture describes sin not simply as a fumble not simply as a mistake, but as a treachery pure and simple and God who is holy and just cannot simply ignore it. You know, I'm convinced that this is the reason why so many human attempts at reconciliation oftentimes fall

short of the mark or fail to last for any meaningful length of time is because we really don't take seriously the grave nature of human sin and the corruption of the human heart.

In 1938 while war clouds were gathering all over Europe, Neville Chamberlain, who was the Prime Minister of Great Britain went to the Munich conference in order to avert conflict. But while he was there, he ignored the real problem, what we would call the elephant in the room, the problem of German rearmament. He pretended that it wasn't going on, and he came home, waving a piece of paper and declaring to his constituents peace in our time.

But you know your history, there was no peace. Within a month, the German Luftwaffe had Blitz stands like Poland, they had invaded, Chamberlain was voted out, Churchill was voted in and the world was plunged into war. It did no good to ignore the problem, and my friends, God will not ignore the problem of human sin. He is going to deal with it, and he is going to deal with it decisively. Sin has to be punished.

And yet here's the glory of the gospel. God does not punish the guilty. He does the most extraordinary thing, he sends his son in human form to mount the arms of the cross and there a cosmic event takes place. All of the sin of the world, past, present and future is heaped upon Jesus Christ and there he pays the price to the full, for your sin and mine. And that is why Paul says Jesus Christ is the only way to be reconciled to the Father because he is the only full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. It is by his shed blood that we who are far off are brought near; it is by his flesh that the dividing wall of hostility is torn down forever. Do you realize that?

Do you realize that you're a sinner, that you're separated from God but God has provided a way by which you can be reconciled? How does the old hymn put it, "should my tears forever flow, should my zeal no languor know, all for sin could not atone, for Thou must save and Thou alone. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee." There will never be normalcy on planet Earth. There will never be peace between brothers and sisters, until there is peace with the Father and there's only one way to have peace with the Father through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

But then Paul says, there is one more thing that is necessary as redeemed people, as reconciled people, as people who have peace with God, we are now called to live in peace with one another. You know, it's hard for us to imagine what the first century world in which Paul operated was really like. But it was a deeply divided society. There were multiple fault lines, and they were hard and fast. Now, I know we think we live in a divided society today, and the country is deeply divided. All you have to do is watch the supreme court hearings from this past week to get a sense of that.

But let me tell you, as bad as it is today, it was far worse in Paul's day. Jews were divided from Gentiles, Greeks were divided from Romans, the wealthy were divided from the poor, the educated from the ignorant, men from women, and the list went on and on. And furthermore, these dividing walls that existed were hard and fast, and many people did not want them to change.

The Greeks didn't want to be reconciled to the Romans who they regarded as right boorish. The Romans didn't like the Greeks because they regarded them as has beens. Slaves were at enmity with their masters and masters of course did not want anything to change with regard to their slaves. Women were oftentimes regarded as nothing more than chattel. These were deep divisions.

And yet history records that toward the end of the first century a most remarkable thing began to happen. In some places, like in the city of Antioch in Syria, in the 13th chapter of the book of Acts, the cracks began to appear in these dividing wall of hostility. The lines began to blur. In some places, those dividing walls came down completely. And you ask yourself, well, what was the cause of this remarkable change? Well, we know what the change was, it was the spread of Christianity.

It was the spread of the gospel. For as people went forth, they began to realize that despite their differences, there was one thing that they held in common. They were all sinners saved by grace. Despite their many differences, they shared one thing in common, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and with that knowledge, they began to reach out to each other in love and mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. And those walls began to fall; the world began to change ever so slightly, and for the first time since Eden, people began to catch a glimpse of what a normal world really looks like.

Well, how about us? If we are sinner saved by grace, who is it that today we need to reach out to and be reconciled to? Who is it in your life that you need to call up this afternoon? Who is it that you need to send that letter to? Or that email? Who is it that you need to stop by and visit on your way home? Oh, you may be thinking to yourself, well, so and so wronged me. And as soon as they make amends, as soon as they apologize, well, then there can be reconciliation. Then there can be peace on earth.

Listen to me. If that is the way you are operating this morning, it may very well be that you have never understood the Christian gospel. For if God had waited for us to come to Him, we would be lost forever. No, instead God, the injured party, comes to us the guilty and he makes peace by his shed blood. And in so doing, he sets us an example of how we are called to be peace makers.

You know, they say that a picture is worth 1000 words. So let me go ahead and give you a picture, a glimpse of what a normal world looks like. The event took place in 1865 at the end of the war between the states in Richmond Virginia at St. Paul's Church. The Reverend Charles Minnigerode had just issued the invitation for the congregation to come forward to receive the sacrament, immediately, a tall black man stood up and walked down the center aisle, went up to the chancel, knelt down and presented himself for communion. And no one moved. No one knew what to do because up to this point black people had always been consigned to the galleries.

So nobody knew what to do. Everyone realized the social order had been turned on its head. But nobody knew how to respond. Even the Rector didn't know how to respond. And then all the sudden another man stood up, a white man, he walked down the center aisle, he went up to the chancel, there any number of places where he could have knelt, but he purposely went up and he knelt right next to the black man, and held up his hands like the beggar that he was, to receive the bread of heaven.

After the service when he was asked why he did it, General Robert E Lee replied "because the ground is always level at the foot of the cross." For he himself is our peace, he has made the two one, he has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. My friends, that's what a normal world looks like.

Let us pray. Gracious God, Heavenly Father, we come before you as the wretched blind lost sinners that we are and we plead the blood of Jesus Christ over our lives, reconcile us to yourself, by your Son's sacrifice and grant us the grace then to go forth as reconcilers, peacemakers in the world. That this broken, weary old planet of ours may begin to catch a glimpse of normalcy. We ask this in Jesus' name and for Jesus' sake. Amen.