

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, September 27, 2009**

CRUMBLING WALLS

Ephesians 2:11-18

It may not seem like it, but what we're doing here this morning is one of the most unusual things that ever happens in a Christian church. A Jew is preaching to Gentiles! Of course, I'm not preaching Judaism but the Christian gospel that fulfills the faith of Israel. But Jews who are also Christians are pretty rare, and Jews that are Christians and preachers rarer still. According to my reading on the subject, as little as fifty years ago most Gentile Christians were unaware that there even was such a thing as Jewish Christians. Even today, there are Gentile churches where a pastor could never serve if it was known that he was Jewish, and where Jewish believers would be made to feel uncomfortable. In fact, there are many in the mainline churches who would say that Jews shouldn't become Christians at all. As for my brethren according to the flesh, a significant percentage of Jewish Christians have segregated themselves in so-called "Messianic" congregations, where the language of worship is frequently Hebrew, the Old Testament festivals are observed, and Gentile Christians would feel distinctly out of place.

You'll remember from the first ten verses of Ephesians 2 that the apostle has just explained to them the source and nature of their salvation. They had been saved by the grace of God, when they were dead in their sins, that they might glorify God and do the good works that He intended for them. In verse 11, he tells the members of this largely if not entirely Gentile church to "therefore remember" – remember what? Look at verse 12. "Remember...that at that time" (when you were saved) "you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world." At one time, every Gentile lay outside of God's covenant with Abraham, a covenant that was made with the patriarch and with his children. At one time, every Gentile was reduced to creating his own gods, because they knew little of the true God who had made them in His own image beyond His existence and power, as Paul says in Romans 1:20. At one time, every Gentile, even those who were ignorant of the fact, had no hope of eternal life, or redemption from sin, or fellowship with God. But with the coming of Christ, everything changed.

So, Faith and the Church of the Occoquan Valley are trend-setters, and it's a trend I hope becomes a vast movement, because it would be a movement back to the New Testament Church, back to the days when Jews and Gentiles, as well as people of the most varied social, ethnic, linguistic, and economic backgrounds mingled freely. Oh, they had their problems. James' hard words to the wealthy among his readers, telling them to stop treating the poor like second-class citizens of the Kingdom are proof of that. But despite the problems that sin caused, the apostolic Church was a first in human history to that point. St. Paul tells us why as we proceed along in the second chapter of his letter to the Ephesians.

First, look at verse 13. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. “It’s as if God has looked at Israel and said, “this family’s not big enough! We need to throw open the doors, and let in anyone who wants to join the party.” The blood of Christ, shed in fulfillment of the Old Testament Temple sacrifices, was not just shed for Israel, even though Christ’s death was the fulfillment of Israel’s Law. That blood was shed for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

It was in anticipation of that sacrifice, which would throw open the doors of the Kingdom to all people, that Jesus told the parable of the wedding banquet recorded in Matthew 22. You remember that in the parable some of the original guests made light of the invitation and went about their business, while others mistreated the servants sent to invite them. The result was that the king sent his army to destroy those who had spurned his invitation, and told his servants in Matthew 22:8, “Go into the street corners, and invite to the banquet anyone you find.” Some of those invited during this second wave also turned out to be unworthy, but many were those who were treated like royalty at that supper. This parable was one of the ways our Lord let His disciples know that after His death and resurrection, the Kingdom was no longer just for Jews, but was for Gentiles as well, because what He did on the Cross, and in His resurrection from the dead, was for all of humanity, not just Israel.

Now, in His dying and rising from the dead, Christ did two things that St. Paul wants us to know about. The first is in verses 14 and 15. “He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of separation. “The New King James puts that last expression this way: Christ has “broken down the middle wall of separation,” which really gets at what Paul is referring to better. See, it’s an expression that is filled with meaning. It refers to the Jerusalem Temple, which was the center of Jewish worship and cultural life in the first century, before its destruction by the Romans in 70 A.D.

That Temple had five distinct areas, each separated by a wall. At the center was the Holy of Holies, into which only the High Priest was allowed, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Outside of that was the Court of the Priests, into which any member of the Levitical priesthood could go, and where animal sacrifice took place on a daily basis. Next was the Court of the Israelites, which might better be named the Court of the Israelite Men (sorry, ladies). It was a place of prayer where only men were allowed to go. Next was the Court of Women, where women and children prayed. Interestingly enough, these two courts are duplicated in a way at the modern Wailing Wall, where there are distinct areas for men and women, and no mingling is allowed. Anyway, the outer court was the Court of the Gentiles, and was a place that non-Jews who had not converted to Judaism, who are sometimes referred to as “God-fearers,” could go for prayer to the God of Israel, or to transact business with Temple officials. There was a sign hanging on the wall above the gates leading into the next courtyard, which said that death awaited any Gentile who sought to go further than allowed. It was that wall that St. Paul called the “middle wall,” and it was that wall between Gentiles and Jews that had come down, so that both could now mix freely and pray and worship together before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

How has this miracle been accomplished? Go on to verse 15. “He Himself is our peace...by abolishing in His flesh the commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace. “Let’s sort this out piece by piece.

First, what was it that separated Jews and Gentiles? More than anything else, it was the religious and ceremonial Law, the “law of commandments and regulations.” The moral law, according to Romans 2, verses 14 and 15, was something written by God on the hearts of Gentiles, so they could follow it just as Jews could. But the ceremonial Law was unique to Jews, and kept with ferocious zeal at least in part because it did set them apart and stamp them as God’s special people.

Not all of them kept it so well, of course. I remember when I was growing up, we’d light Shabbat candles at Passover and Yom Kippur, because that was something Jews just did to honor God. But my parents loved lobster tail – that was in the days when you didn’t have to take out a second mortgage to afford them – and they weren’t going to give them up just because the Old Testament Law prohibited eating shellfish. So it was in the first century, too. But even when it was only honored in the breach, the Law set Israel apart. It was that Law that Christ abolished. Jews who believed in Jesus as Messiah were no longer required to keep that Law, and Gentiles who became believers in Israel’s Messiah would no longer have to become Jews and obey the Jewish ceremonial Law in order to be counted full members of the Kingdom of God.

Now second, what does St. Paul mean when he says that in Christ “one new man [is created] out of the two”? Does it mean that in the human being Jesus of Nazareth we have a man who’s half Jew, half Gentile? Or parts of one and parts of the other stuck together? Of course not. In truth, there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, except religiously and culturally. What Christ has done is eliminate those differences, creating a new human being who stands before the Lord, not as Jew or Gentile, but as a child of God, in whom the differences between people are of no account, while what makes us the same – our faith in Jesus Christ, our salvation wrought by grace, our citizenship in the Kingdom – is the only thing that counts.

In Galatians 3:28, Paul put it this way: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” All the things we’ve thought separated us – skin or hair or eye color, language, physical appearance of any kind, ethnic origin, political party, musical preferences, age, work skills, anything – make no difference at all to God. Only our standing in Christ matters.

It’s been said that the worship hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. And to that, the church at least here in America has to confess. White doesn’t worship with black, Hispanic with Asian, Pole with Italian. We’ve segregated in other ways, too, by creating denominations that splinter the Body of Christ, for virtually no reason of any consequence. Are our differences really so important that there need to be over 25,000 denominations in the world? And are our cultural differences so important that some can actually say that for the sake of cultural preservation we dare not come

together in love? Such is the state of the Body of Christ in the world today. But as Paul would say, it's not supposed to be this way, and I'm proud to say that this congregation, by calling me and giving me the privilege of serving with you, in its small way has taken a stand against those separations.

May we be open to the Lord's leading as He shows us other ways of leading the Church of Christ back to its apostolic unbrokenness. In dying and rising again, Christ has broken down the walls that lay between us, but that's not all. In fact, the basis for our new relationships with one another are to be found in our new relationship with God. Look at verses 16 and 18. He has created in Himself one new man "that in this one body [He might] reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility....For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

The New Testament Church, our model and foundation, was made up of people from all walks of life, and from a hundred different ethnic, racial, and linguistic groups. They had nothing in common, except the most important thing anyone can have – they had been saved by the blood of the Lamb, and thereby reconciled to God, who forgave their sin, poured out His Holy Spirit upon them, and made them into new creatures destined for an eternity of holiness in the presence of God. The members of that Church loved one another, but not because they all spoke the same language or looked alike or had family ties or worked at the same jobs. They loved one another because they saw in every other member a person for whom Christ had died, and whom God loved enough to send His Son into the world to die for.

We are those people, two thousand years later. We're in the same position they were. We're not all related. We don't all work together, or live in the same city; some of you have come from a different culture, and most of us here are immigrants to this region, and likely bring our fair share of cultural differences to dump into the shared pot of our fellowship. Yet like those Ephesians, we will all stand one day before the judgment seat of Christ, and when He looks at us, He won't see Jew or Gentile, black or white, northern or southern, pastor or lay person, man or woman. All He'll see is children, all offspring of the same heavenly Father. For that, and that alone, He will say, "come and join us at the wedding banquet of the Lamb."